

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS TRÁDÁIL, AGUS COSAINTE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE, AND DEFENCE

Déardaoin, 3 Deireadh Fómhair 2019

Thursday, 3 October 2019

The Joint Committee met at 2 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies

Seanadóirí / Senators

Niall Collins,	Ivana Bacik,
Seán Crowe,	Billy Lawless,
Maureen O'Sullivan.	Gabrielle McFadden.

Teachta / Deputy Brendan Smith sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: I propose that we go into private session. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 2.08 p.m. and resumed in public session at 2.11 p.m.

Foreign Affairs Council: Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Chairman: Today's meeting is to discuss with the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, matters that have arisen at the Foreign Affairs Council. He and his officials are very welcome and we appreciate the briefing material that has been provided. The format of the meeting is that we will hear the Tánaiste's opening statement before going into a question and answer session with the members of the committee.

Before proceeding to the business of the meeting, I remind members and those in the Public Gallery that their mobile phones should be switched off completely or switched to airplane mode for the duration of the meeting as they can cause interference, even if on silent mode, with the recording equipment in committee rooms.

I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or body outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

I invite the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to make his opening statement.

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I welcome the many ambassadors attending the meeting. It is good to have such interest in our committee discussions and deliberations. I am conscious that on the previous occasion I came before the committee we were very tight on time and I am glad to be back; I hope to be able to address any questions members might have. I thank the committee for the invitation to come before it this afternoon. I am keen to update members on developments at the EU Foreign Affairs Council, which most recently met on 15 July, and to discuss other foreign policy issues. There was also a meeting in New York of the EU Ministers who were there, which was the vast majority of them.

The Department has provided an information note to the committee on the range of issues the Foreign Affairs Council has considered in the nine months since we last met. In order to maximise the time available for discussion, I will address the major themes of the Council's discussions in my opening remarks and we can have a broader discussion afterwards on whatever committee members would like.

As committee members know, the Foreign Affairs Council frequently discusses Middle East issues. As part of our commitment to work more closely with the region, a meeting of EU Ministers with responsibility for foreign affairs and the League of Arab States took place in February. It prepared the first ever EU-League of Arab States summit later that month. I made strong statements on Syria and Yemen, stressing that any refugee returns to Syria should be voluntary.

In February, Ministers discussed the worsening humanitarian and security situation in Syria. We were clear that any refugee returns must be voluntary, and should only take place when conditions are right and safe. We expressed support for the UN special envoy, Mr. Geir Pedersen, and also discussed preparations for the Syria conference in March, where Ireland pledged €25 million, bringing the total amount of our humanitarian assistance to Syria since 2012 to more than €143 million. I am encouraged that in recent days there has been agreement to establish a constitutional committee for Syria. I hope this is a first step towards an inclusive political settlement, for which so many people yearn.

Also in February, we adopted Council conclusions on Yemen, reiterating our support for the implementation of the Stockholm agreement and urging agreement with the UN-led process. In March, we discussed ways to support the UN special envoy and to maintain the EU's commitment in delivering humanitarian aid. Progress since then on the implementation of the Stockholm agreement has been disappointing. I hope that recent indications that the Houthis may consider a ceasefire can be built on. We will continue to support UN efforts to reach a political solution. There has been more than enough tragedy in Yemen to date.

I know the situation in Libya is of concern to many committee members, particularly Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan who has raised it with me a number of times in the Dáil. At the May Foreign Affairs Council, we discussed recent developments in Libya, including the fighting around Tripoli, with the UN Special Representative for Libya, Mr. Ghassan Salamé. I am very clear that there is no military solution to this crisis. We urged all parties to re-commit to the UN-facilitated political dialogue, and called for an immediate ceasefire and the protection of civilians, including migrants and refugees.

At the March Foreign Affairs Council, I called for a continuation of the full mandate of Operation Sophia to allow time for the outstanding issues around disembarkation to be addressed without disruption to the critical humanitarian work of the mission in which the Naval Service has been very involved. Unfortunately, it was not possible to get full agreement on this issue, in which I have personally invested a great deal of time and effort, but we did ensure the operation will continue and that its mandate will remain under review so as to be able to respond to any changing circumstances. Ireland will continue to work towards a resolution of outstanding issues to allow for a resumption of deployment of naval assets in the Mediterranean.

We must act together to find European-wide solutions to address the issues of migration. Member states must play their part in burden-sharing and helping to relieve pressure on front-line member states. We need to find a consensus based on solidarity, responsibility and international law. Addressing the migration crisis requires deeper political, economic and development relationships between the EU and our partners, particularly in Africa.

The Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, attended the June Foreign Affairs Council, where Ministers had a working lunch with the Jordanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Ayman Safadi. The discussion focused on regional issues, including Iran's negative influence in the region, the Middle East peace process and hosting Syrian refugees.

At the July Foreign Affairs Council, we discussed Iran again. I am deeply concerned about Iran's steps away from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA, nuclear agreement and the recent escalation of tensions in the region following an attack on Saudi Arabia on 14 September. The EU remains committed to maintaining the JCPOA and we urge Iran to return to full compliance without delay. Last week, I raised this directly with Iran at a meeting with its President and Minister with responsibility for foreign affairs in New York. The EU has worked

very hard politically to try to protect the JCPOA. The US Administration takes a very different view on the agreement. It makes it much more difficult for the EU to maintain that political position if Iran deliberately moves away from the conditions and obligations under that agreement. It is important to say that because we are trying to protect and maintain an agreement. From a compliance perspective, if Iran moves away from what it has committed to, the EU position will become more difficult. It is important to be direct and honest about that.

In July, we also discussed the situation in Iraq. We adopted Council conclusions on the EU's Iraq strategy and stressed our support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country and for economic, political and security sector reform.

In April, Council conclusions were adopted on Afghanistan. Ireland supports an Afghan led and owned peace process, with a constructive role played by international actors and the meaningful participation of women in particular. Along with our EU partners, we are also working to ensure that the humanitarian situation in the country is not neglected. We encourage all parties to the conflict to come together and negotiate for a sustainable peace.

In January 2019, the first EU-African Union ministerial level meeting took place. Ministers focused on implementing the memorandum of understanding on peace, security and governance and on President Juncker's initiative, the alliance for sustainable investments and jobs, which seeks to boost private sector engagement, increase trade and enhance job creation. The Council conclusions adopted underlined the importance of the EU's strategic partnership with Africa. This is something in which I am really interested. It may be an interesting issue for the committee to explore in the context of both the next money market fund policy and EU neighbourhood policy.

The political and institutional structures between the EU and the African Union are hopelessly inadequate. The African continent will have an additional 1 billion people on it within the next 25 years. Many of the partner countries with which we work in respect of development face what are, quite frankly, impossible challenges. To simply stand still in respect of unemployment statistics, Ethiopia will need to create 2 million jobs each year. Across the border in Kenya, 1 million jobs will need to be created each year. It will simply not be possible to do this in a sustainable or manageable manner if we are not working in partnership and helping the continent of Africa, which is very close to us geographically, to cope with the enormous changes it is facing. It is a massive challenge from the perspectives of climate change, food and water security, conflict and governance, and migration. These are all issues in which the EU needs to be central in finding solutions. Otherwise, we will be central to the challenges and problems that flow from the failure to find a solution. That point is not lost on President Juncker, who has highlighted this issue as a priority for the EU in the years ahead. Ireland can certainly contribute a great deal to that debate.

At the February meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, on the Horn of Africa, I emphasised that we must act in a co-ordinated manner to strengthen democratic governance and inclusive economic growth in that region. I welcomed the peace process between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and EU support to both sides to institutionalise and consolidate that new relationship.

At the June meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, Ireland strongly supported the EU's statement on Sudan and the robust leadership shown by the African Union and Ethiopia in their joint efforts to resolve the crisis there. I am very encouraged by the civilian-led transition agreed in September, which we hope will pave the way for peace, security and economic growth in Sudan.

The Sahel was discussed at the May meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council. This meeting included discussions with the G5 Sahel countries. The EU has prioritised security, humanitarian and development issues across the region. France has been a real leader in these efforts. We need to focus on tackling the root causes of conflict, migration and poverty, while maintaining focus on governance and human rights. A more holistic response to issues affecting the region is required. The High Representative co-chaired the fifth EU-G5 Sahel ministerial meeting in July.

This year marked the tenth anniversary of the eastern partnership. At the April meeting of the Council, we discussed implementation of its reform programme, 20 Deliverables for 2020, and the future of the partnership post-2020. At the ministerial meeting in May, my EU colleagues and I sent a strong signal of our continuing commitment to the eastern partnership and to the principles of inclusivity and differentiation.

At the March meeting, discussions on Moldova focused on the February parliamentary elections there. The High Representative described the elections as competitive, with fundamental rights respected, but with some shortcomings. While coalition talks were unsuccessful for several months, a coalition government was formed on 8 June between the pro-EU ACUM party bloc and the pro-Russia Party of Socialists of President Igor Dodon. The EU is ready to work with the Government of the Republic of Moldova on the basis of a mutual commitment to reforms and the principles enshrined in our association agreement.

At the February meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, we expressed our continued solidarity with Ukraine on the fifth anniversary of the Maidan. In addition to providing humanitarian assistance and supporting conflict resolution efforts, we will continue to support Ukraine's reform agenda and to increase EU support for the Azov Sea region which, as members will know, has been a source of great tension in recent months.

In January, Ministers discussed the EU's relationship with the ten member states of the Association of South East Asian Nations, ASEAN. Following the Council meeting, I attended the 22nd EU-ASEAN ministerial meeting where we discussed ways to enhance co-operation, particularly on fair trade, human rights, sustainable development and climate change.

At the April meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, we discussed EU-China relations. We agreed on the need to balance an open and constructive relationship with remaining firm in pursuit of EU values and interests. The EU-China summit which took place following the meeting of the Council demonstrated the success of this approach. We must engage China in supporting the existing rules-based international order and multilateral institutions, while remaining clear on the need for universal standards and agreed rules and practices to be respected. Consensus among EU partners is essential in delivering this approach. As ever, the EU is much stronger when it speaks with one voice.

The current crisis in Venezuela has been discussed at successive meetings of the Council this year and we received regular updates on the progress of the international contact group, ICG. At the May meeting, I voiced support for the ICG, stressed the need for continued engagement, and welcomed progress made on the humanitarian track of the ICG. In July, we reiterated our support for the Oslo talks process between the Maduro Administration and the opposition. While these talks, which are being held in Barbados but run by Norway, are now stalled, Ireland will continue to encourage both sides to engage in good faith in an inclusive, serious and results orientated way. We also support EU efforts to achieve a peaceful electoral path as a way out of the current crisis. Obviously, there are no military solutions to that particular conflict.

The Council continues to monitor the implementation of the EU's global strategy, which commits us to promoting peace, prosperity, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. In June, High Representative Mogherini presented a report assessing three years of the global strategy, which outlines achievements across all five strands: security and defence; resilience; the integrated approach to conflicts and crises; regional co-operative orders; and global governance. Addressing the challenges outlined in the strategy requires united, consistent and effective action by the EU. At the Council meeting in June, Ministers held a further discussion about ways to improve the effectiveness of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. We exchanged views on how to enhance our unity, cohesion and co-ordination.

The Foreign Affairs Council also addressed implementation of the EU joint action plan on disinformation, adopted last December, which aims to improve the detection and analysis of disinformation, strengthen co-operation, raise awareness and increase resilience. The EU has established a rapid alert system for national points of contact which facilitates information-sharing. A mapping exercise has also been conducted to assess the institutional capacity of member states. A network of fact-checkers and media monitors is being developed. We are trying to tighten our systems because, whether it is hybrid warfare or deliberate disinformation for other political reasons, every open economy and society is vulnerable. The EU is taking a much more collective approach where that information is shared in a much more co-ordinated and structured way.

An important cross-cutting aspect of the work of the Council is the centrality of the multilateral system in addressing global challenges. Ireland is a candidate for the UN Security Council for 2021-22. I spent much of last week at the UN General Assembly promoting Ireland's candidature and highlighting our global contributions to peace and security, human rights and development. That statement is addressed to the ambassadors in the Gallery whose support I hope we will have.

There is a range of other issues to which I have not referred. Obviously, if members wish to ask me anything on the big issue of the day, Brexit, I will certainly not duck the issue. This is such a broad brief that we could speak about any country in the world at this meeting. Whatever direction the committee wants to take in questioning, I will try to be as open and responsive as I can be.

Chairman: I thank the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for his opening statement. As Deputy Crowe has a commitment in the Chamber soon, I call on him first.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I thank the Chairman for facilitating me, as I will be debating legislation in the Chamber soon.

What Boris Johnson presented to the European Commission as a workable alternative to the backstop yesterday amounts to a dangerous and reckless proposition that many of us would say plays fast and loose with the Good Friday Agreement. The British Government is offering an all-Ireland regulatory zone for all goods but that there would be customs checks on the island. All these arrangements are dependent on the consent of the Northern Ireland Assembly in an opt-in, opt-out vote. What is the Government's view of this? Does the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade agree that these proposals, as framed, are not acceptable? One concern many of us have expressed, as have commentators, is that these proposals effectively give the DUP a veto through an abuse of the petition of concern against the backstop. Is that one of the concerns the Government has? I did not hear such concern in any commentary coming from the Government.

Considering the majority of people in the North voted to remain, there is a view among pro-remain parties that they are being dragged out against their will. What is the Government's position on that? Has the Tánaiste told his European counterparts there needs to be a discussion on this? Is he concerned that these are not serious proposals and are more about the next election in the UK? Is this about Boris Johnson trying to bring his own party and the Brexit Party together to fight an election in England on the basis that the European Union has turned down what he considers a reasonable offer? We have said all along that the backstop, or any alternative to it, cannot be time limited in any way. Yet, again, this seems to be what the British Government and Boris Johnson are proposing.

Does the Tánaiste believe that Mr. Johnson wants a deal, that this is an opening gambit or it is about the next election? Over the past couple of days, we saw the arrival of customs vehicles in Dundalk. Is that coincidental? Is the Government preparing for customs checks in the Border region? This sent a worrying message to many people. No one wants a hard border. We are all on the same page that we want to ensure there is no hard border on the island. We want to see the all-Ireland economy and the Good Friday Agreement protected. It would be useful to send out a signal from here as to what the Government's thinking is on this proposal.

The Palestine situation was not discussed at the Council meetings. We know that Israel is in a political stalemate after its latest election as its parties try to form a government. We are concerned about the rhetoric used during the recent election campaign. The Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, said he plans to illegally annexe 30% of the occupied territories in the West Bank and Palestine. Again, we do not know whether he will remain as Israeli Prime Minister for much longer. There might be another election. Has the Tánaiste any concerns about this? Was this call from Benjamin Netanyahu just simply electioneering? Is what he is saying in public what we already know, namely, that he wants to destroy any attempt at a two-state solution and deepen Israeli apartheid rule in Palestine? Since Mr. Netanyahu became Israeli Prime Minister, we have seen a significant increase in illegal settlements. Some of us believe the Government could do more in response to these worrying developments. Will the Tánaiste outline what the Government has done about these developments? A Dáil motion was passed on the recognition of the state of Palestine. Does the Tánaiste believe the Government should move on this? Has he changed his view on the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018 which would make trade with illegal settlements a criminal offence in Ireland?

The war in Syria was mentioned but Turkey's involvement was not discussed. I am concerned about Turkey's military invasion of northern Syria and its attempted land grab there. Many see it as a lifeline being thrown to ISIS in that region. Kurdish communities in northern Syria are extremely fearful of the invading Turkish army. What is the Government's view about these illegal actions of a NATO army? What is the view of other EU member states? Was this discussed at the Council meeting?

We all agree the war in Yemen is horrific and getting worse. We have seen the emaciated bodies of starving children there. Were European military exports to Saudi Arabia discussed? Did the Government push for an EU embargo on the sales of military goods to Saudi Arabia, considering the high probability that many of these weapons will be used to commit war crimes in this conflict?

The Tánaiste said the migration issue was discussed. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, 1,000 people have died in the Mediterranean Sea trying to reach Europe in 2019 so far. The UNHCR is urgently calling for an increase in search and rescue capacity, including return of European Union state vessels to operations in the Mediter-

anean, as well as acknowledgement of the crucial role of NGO boats in the region. Does the Government agree with this? What is its view on that? I am aware some states are opposed to it. In terms of the humanitarian ships that picked up so many refugees and migrants from rafts, does the Tánaiste believe there is a role for us, as Europeans, to try to save as many lives as possible in that regard?

Will the Tánaiste outline whether we support the new proposals from Germany, France, Italy and Malta regarding the so-called fast-track system for getting people off boats in trouble in the Mediterranean and distributing people on board who want to seek asylum among countries willing to take them? What is the Irish view on this migration issue?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am conscious there are other members here as well but the Deputy has asked many good questions. I know he has to leave shortly to return to the House, so I will try to give him some answers. On the proposals that have come from the British Government in the past 24 hours, the Deputy asked if I believed this is a serious effort to get a deal. I believe it is a serious effort. If he is asking me if this proposal will be the basis of a deal, I do not think it will but there are some good things in it and it is important to recognise that. We have to make a judgment call as to whether we believe the British Government is serious about getting a deal or whether this is simply about positioning for a general election with a view to a blame game if there is not a deal. Our judgment is that the British Government does want to get a deal. We want to work to help it get a deal, obviously through the Barnier task force, which is where the negotiation takes place.

In terms of the proposals, the positives in the proposal are that there is now a clear commitment from the UK to maintain full alignment on the island of Ireland for goods and agrifood products that effectively reduces the need for checks in certain areas. That is very positive and we need to recognise that. It is consistent with much of what the backstop was committed to achieving.

Where I believe there are difficulties is in respect of the customs element of the proposal. If Northern Ireland is in a different customs union from the rest of the island of Ireland, it is difficult to see how customs checks can be avoided. I understand that the British Prime Minister said in Westminster today that under no circumstances will there be any physical customs checks on the island of Ireland from its proposal. It is difficult to see how those two things marry in terms of consistency, but we have to allow a process of discussion and negotiation to take place in the Barnier task force, which is now forensically looking at the paper, and the legal document that comes with it, to see whether it is legally operable. However, they have already given an indication that in their view the customs proposals are very problematic and do not deliver the same outcome as the backstop, which effectively ensured that there was full alignment, both in terms of the Single Market as well as customs, on the island of Ireland. It is important for us to be respectful but also clear that while these proposals are a step in the right direction, they will need to evolve further if there is to be a basis for agreement.

The other element the Deputy raised, which I believe is also a concern, is how we accommodate an Executive in Northern Ireland in terms of a consultative role around whatever mechanisms are agreed to prevent physical Border infrastructure re-emerging. There is a consultative role already factored in to the withdrawal agreement and the Irish and Northern Ireland protocol as part of the backstop mechanism that had been agreed. If there was future change in terms of EU regulation that impacted on Northern Ireland, there was, through the implementation of the backstop, a consultative role for a Northern Ireland Assembly in that regard. What Boris Johnson is proposing is to go way beyond that and essentially give the Northern Ireland Assem-

bly the power to opt in or not to the arrangements that are being proposed. Obviously, we have to scrutinise what he means by that. On initial reading, it would suggest that that means that a single party or a minority of people in the Assembly could effectively block the implementation of these proposals. That is not something we can support under any circumstances. We cannot have a situation where a minority of people are imposing a future on the majority of people through a blocking mechanism. That simply will not work and it certainly is not consistent with the Good Friday Agreement.

It is important that we are honest and upfront about that. That is something on which we are in close contact with the task force because to a certain extent they rely on us in terms of understanding how the systems work within an Assembly and an Executive and issues around the use of petition of concern and so on. While it is an important tool, it could potentially be used as a blocking mechanism for a minority, which would then impose a set of conditions on a majority of people who do not want that. There is already tension in Northern Ireland because the majority of people did not want to leave the European Union. However, the idea that the solutions we are putting in place to mitigate against the damage that has been caused by Brexit for Northern Ireland, and for the island of Ireland as a whole, could be blocked by a minority as well will not be the basis of a deal.

We are open to looking at how a role for an Assembly in Northern Ireland - people who are elected and representing people from all communities in Northern Ireland - can be factored in to any proposals. We are happy to work on those issues, but as we read it today, the proposal from the British Prime Minister, which has been confirmed, unhelpfully, by a number of politicians, seems to suggest that a minority can effectively block the imposition of proposals in the future, which I do not believe will work.

In summary, we are responding cautiously to this proposal. We believe it is serious. We believe it is a step in the right direction to try to get a deal, but we believe there are some elements of it that will need to evolve significantly if they are to be the basis for an agreement in the next week or so. That is the timeline we are on. That seriousness is also reflected in the task force, in President Juncker's office. We all want to try to get a deal. We all want to work with the British Prime Minister and his team, but we have to be honest also and not pretend or get carried away in terms of spin. There is still a lot of negotiation and work to do and the proposal currently on the table from the British Government will not be the basis of a deal in itself. It will need to evolve, particularly on the customs area, and in the other area I mentioned relating to consultation and consent.

In terms of Israel and Palestine, as the Deputy is aware, I am personally very interested in this issue. I spoke a lot about it with different partners and colleagues in New York, especially with the Arab League, but also with many others. There is much political uncertainty in Israel. Following a second general election, there does not seem to be the ability yet to be able to put a government together. It is very difficult to bring forward any new proposals unless there is an Israeli government in place. Some of the commitments that were made in the heat of an election were very unfortunate. I was quite vocal at the time in terms of criticising those commitments. I believe they propose something that is illegal and would be very strongly rejected by the international community. The idea that Israel would simply annex large parts of the West Bank, making a two-state solution with two viable future states virtually impossible, is one at which the international community expresses very strong concern. I contributed to that. Some people dismissed those commitments as electioneering. I do not think we should simply dismiss them as that. There must be a very strong signal from the international community that

any future Israeli government would not have the support of the international community, or at least the majority thereof, in taking that course of action. My view is that the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018 is not legally sound legislation and we should not be pursuing it. That does not mean that The Government and I will not continue to be vocal on the Middle East peace process; we will. We will insist on a two-state solution as any final outcome, offering very consistent criticism of the expansion of settlements on Palestinian land and a series of other issues as well.

I will read from my notes on Turkey's involvement in Syria. Turkey has borne a very heavy burden from the Syrian conflict, including hosting millions of refugees as well as a risk of a spillover of violence. Its concern about the conflict on its southern border is understandable. I have met the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey on several occasions and I have raised some of these issues with him. However, our messages to Turkey on Syria have emphasised our concern for the protection of civilians and have urged caution to avoid escalating the conflict any further. Civilians on both sides of the border, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds, are all entitled to protection and safety.

On Yemen and Saudi Arabia, there is no consensus on an arms embargo of Saudi Arabia at EU level, but the issue has been raised. Such decisions require the agreement of everybody at EU level. Irish efforts have concentrated on ensuring the effective implementation of agreements that EU member states have already signed. These include the export control regimes and the implementation of the 2014 Arms Trade Treaty, which has been signed and ratified by all member states. 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 to consider measures to mitigate the risk of these violations. I understand that several EU member states have said they will not export arms to Saudi Arabia until the war in Yemen is over. That has been an ongoing discussion.

Regarding the Mediterranean-----

Deputy Seán Crowe: Regarding the same issue, I refer the use of food as a weapon in Yemen. Is there even agreement that this is wrong? Could the European Union step in there?

Deputy Simon Coveney: There is agreement on ensuring that we can get medical supplies, food and supports into Yemen. The EU has spent a significant amount of money supporting aid efforts to try to do that. It is inexcusable knowingly to allow children, or anyone for that matter, to starve and to cut off supply routes for humanitarian assistance. However, this is complicated. It pertains to access to some ports where there are serious security issues and ongoing conflict. That is why we are so committed to supporting efforts for a political solution and the maintenance of a ceasefire so that we can access many of very vulnerable communities. The only show in town has been the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement. We want to continue to support efforts in that regard.

Regarding the Mediterranean, Ireland was not involved in a meeting that took place in Malta on 23 September, which was organised by the Maltese Government and attended by Maltese, French, German and Italian interior ministers as well as the EU Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship and the Finnish EU Presidency. We were absent because we were in New York. Otherwise I probably would have been there. However, we welcome such efforts to find a consensus among member states on the disembarkation and relocation of migrants arriving in the EU. Ireland has consistently called for all EU states to play their part in burden sharing and for more sustainable solutions to be found to these issues.

Just in case anybody does not know how this works at the moment, I will outline the situation in recent months, though things are starting to change now. If a ship, whether state-owned or, more commonly, NGO-owned, had migrants on board and was able to access a port in Malta, Italy or somewhere else, there would be a phone call around different member states to see whether they would take some of those refugees voluntarily. That is normally the condition of allowing that ship to disembark. That is totally understandable. Consider a minister in Malta, a small island where potentially thousands of migrants might disembark. Unless such an official knows his or her government can manage and other member states will help share that burden, it is very difficult to allow a ship in, both politically and in pragmatic terms. The previous Italian Government took a very hard line on this issue. The humanitarian element of Operation Sophia effectively collapsed because of the inability to disembark. That is why the remit changed.

On this issue I have been very critical of the EU and of the inability to get an agreement between all member states on burden sharing, even if that burden sharing meant that some states contribute to financing solutions and others are willing to take migrants. If that kind of pragmatism is needed to get a deal, then we need to consider it. We are certainly supportive of the efforts of France, Germany and others to arrive at a solidarity-based approach, which will make it a lot easier for a new Italian government, a Maltese government or other Mediterranean countries such as Spain, France, Greece etc. to make the political decisions around disembarkation. That is our view. We are and have been very interested in this issue. Obviously that is because we have a moral obligation to be so, but it is also because Irish Naval Service ships have taken about 14,000 people out of the sea in the Mediterranean. That is a lot of people. Many of them were children. We have seen some tragedy this year, but we cannot base a policy on knowingly allowing people to drown in the Mediterranean when we have the capacity to rescue them.

There are other issues we need to factor in. We need to make sure we are not creating a pull factor. I know that sounds crude, but there were legitimate concerns that there were communications between people in Libya who were sending people to sea and people who were waiting to receive them. We need to make sure we are not contributing to the problem. At the same time, we need to ensure a real search and rescue capacity so that we do not knowingly allow the tragedy of which we have seen too much. That is our view. I hope the efforts taking place at present, led by France, Germany and others, can deliver a more structured and streamlined system that can allow disembarkation to happen in a more managed and controlled way, as opposed to crisis by crisis calls to try to get countries to take migrants voluntarily so disembarkation can occur. As it happens, Ireland has quietly and voluntarily taken a number of migrants in those circumstances, usually five, ten or 15, to try to make a contribution to a collective effort to deal with some very difficult issues.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: I will be brief. I was in Iveagh House yesterday where there were positive events to learn about overseas development assistance, ODA. It was good to see a comment in one of the opening speeches in the book, that the Overseas Development Institute has recognised Ireland as the most effective donor in reaching those in extreme poverty. That is very positive. The Minister referred to climate change causing displacement. We are aware of that, but there is another displacement that is not on the agenda where it should be, which is the displacement that arises from multinationals, transnationals and the land grabs that are taking place. I returned from Iveagh House yesterday to chair a meeting for Trócaire in the audio-visual room. Abelino Chub Caal, a human rights defender from Guatemala who was recently released from prison after serving a few years for defending his community, was present. He was in Ireland to receive the Óscar Romero Award. We also had Naw Pe Tha Law from Myan-

mar. The common denominator is that they are trying to protect the land from transnational and multinational companies that have *carte blanche* to do what they like.

That brings me to one of my favourite topics, business and human rights, our national plan and the UN plan. I was taken aback to learn that Ireland is not keen to agree to a legally binding plan. Unless it is legally binding, these corporations will be able to do what they like in countries in South America and Africa. The EU's private sector is becoming more involved in Africa. It is seen as a way to help Africa, as the Minister said. There is a big push on trade with China, and there is no need to mention some of the working conditions there. I attended the recent launch of a report by Church in Chains and it was appalling to learn about what is happening there. Last week, Senator Lawless and I had an interesting discussion with the Shura Council from Saudi Arabia about how migrants are treated in Middle Eastern countries. All of that brings me to my first question. Why is Ireland not supporting a legally binding UN treaty on business and human rights?

Second, I have attended some of the Common Security and Defence Policy, CSDP, meetings that have been held and there is no doubt that there is a growing militarisation agenda in Europe. I partly understand it for some countries, particularly the Baltic countries and countries in eastern Europe. Our committee visited Georgia so we see the fear that exists of further aggression by Russia. However, I do not believe militarisation is the answer in these situations. That leads me to continuing the exchange we had on the European peace facility. There are questions about that. It is fine in theory, but transparency and accountability are not obvious so there are concerns about that. Will proposals go to national parliaments or, for example, to our committee? Is there a guarantee that peace-building alternatives will be considered first? Do we know that the list of eligible equipment will exclude lethal weapons?

Deputy Crowe mentioned Palestine. I want to deal with another angle, the national state law, which is that the country is Jewish and democratic. How can the rights of Palestinian people be recognised if that is what the Government is saying about the state? I am aware of the Tánaiste's interest in this and the procedure he is following. He said that things are said in the heat of an election. However, settlements are continuing outside the heat of an election. He has seen this and so have I. I have been there. The Green Line is gone. We are doing a disservice and being disrespectful to the Palestinian people in continuing to talk about the two-state solution when everybody knows that it is not viable. It is becoming less and less viable as more settlements are built.

My final question is on our humanitarian assistance to Syria. How is that disbursed?

Deputy Simon Coveney: It was very encouraging that ODI ranked Ireland number one for our development assistance programme in terms of getting money to the least well-off or the people furthest behind, to use the sustainable development goal, SDG, term. We can do more, but it is good to see that the programme is working.

I must correct the Deputy on multinationals. We are not opposing a legally binding treaty. Ireland is open to looking at options for progress on a legally binding treaty to regulate the activities of transnational corporations and other business enterprises, provided it covers all economic operators, be they multinationals or domestic companies. Any such instrument should reflect essential human rights principles. It should reaffirm the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights and stress the primary responsibility of states under existing international human rights law to protect against human rights violations. Any new initiative should build on, rather than duplicate, existing measures, such as the Organisation for Eco-

conomic Co-operation and Development, OECD, guidelines for multinational enterprises and the International Labour Organization, ILO, tripartite declaration of principles concerning multinational enterprises and social policy. Ultimately, if it is to achieve its objectives, a legally binding instrument must enjoy broad support among UN member states. This will not work if only a handful of countries do it, nor will it work unless they put pressure on others to do the same. There must be a large coalition of countries to do this together if it is going to be effective. Otherwise, certain business activity will move away from countries that are trying to do the right thing into other countries. We want to try to reward countries for doing the right thing and get a consensus-based approach. Ireland has no issue with trying to work towards a legally binding instrument that would be effective.

The European peace facility, EPF, is still a proposal at this stage. It was presented by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, last year. It is receiving a technical examination at official level in Brussels, including in the context of the ongoing multi-annual financial framework, MFF, process. The EPF proposes to bring together existing financial instruments - the Athena mechanism for the funding of CSDP operations and the African peace facility supporting the African Union and peacekeeping. It proposes to increase the funding for these instruments. It also proposes to broaden the EU's capacity to provide military assistance to prevent conflict, preserve peace and strengthen international security in accordance with the objectives of the UN external action set out in Article 212 of the Treaty on European Union.

In simple terms, many parts of the world are nasty places where governance is not working and warlords dominate and make decisions. The EU has to intervene sometimes to try to support state actors who are trying to do the right thing. Somalia is a good example of that. It is a government that is trying to change Somalia to move away from violence, intimidation and terrorism. There is a peacekeeping force there. While reform is needed over time, it is essential to maintain peace and stability. The EU has a big part in funding that. Likewise in terms of Athena, it was essentially an anti-piracy initiative on the shores of Somalia where EU interventions and funding have made a positive impact on reducing and undermining the capacity for piracy. That has allowed shipping to take place in a much safer zone than was previously the case.

I understand what the Deputy is saying with regard to the focus of the EU needing to be on peace, stability, supporting peace, responsible development, partnership and so forth, but there are also times when we must help with the security infrastructure of a state. If we get that wrong, it could contribute to the problem but there is a reason we have peacekeepers in different parts of the world. That is essentially the UN version of this. Irish peacekeepers, who are trained soldiers, on the Golan Heights and in southern Lebanon and Mali are making a positive contribution to peace but they carry arms. I also think the EU must have the capacity to be able to fund interventions, partnerships and programmes that are about the more difficult side of conflict prevention and sometimes conflict intervention to try to bring about stability and peace. I accept that this is a difficult area and there should be scrutiny of how and where we spend money to make sure we are contributing to peace and not conflict. Having been to many of these regions, as has the Deputy, I can see that sometimes intervention is the only course of action to protect vulnerable and exposed people from conflict and that costs money and requires co-ordination, training and co-operation. The EU is trying to create a more efficient and effective collective response to that. That is my understanding of the European peace facility.

I think we are doing a disservice to the Palestinians by giving up on a two-state solution. I do not believe a two-state solution is no longer viable. I think the two-state solution is still

viable and the international community must insist on that as the outcome of any future peace negotiations. If we give up on that, we are essentially talking about some kind of one-state solution where Palestinians continue to be controlled in an occupied territory and I do not believe we will ever have peace and stability if this is the outcome. That is my view. The Deputy can have a different view. This is why we have been and continue to be so critical of expanding settlements. They are illegal. They are essentially pouring concrete on somebody else's land and we will continue to criticise that. The more concrete that is poured on Palestinian land, the more difficult it is to put together proposals for a viable two-state solution. This is why expanding settlements on somebody else's territory because one happens to be the occupier is not only illegal but makes a future peace agreement more difficult because of the complexity of that given the scale of many of the settlements on Palestinian territory in the West Bank and east Jerusalem. Ireland wants to be a friend to Israel and Palestine and Palestinians but the past two years have constituted a very negative period for that relationship and the hopes and aspirations of Palestinians in particular, which is something Ireland consistently speaks out on. I think I have answered the question.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: What about Syria?

Deputy Simon Coveney: My apologies. Since 2012, Ireland has provided over €140 million in humanitarian assistance to those affected by the conflict in Syria and the region, which is our largest ever response to any single crisis. In March 2019, Ireland pledged €25 million to Syria and the region for this year. To date, we have disbursed over €21 million of this amount. This includes support within Syria and support to countries in the region, in particular, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, which host very large numbers of refugees. I have been to some of those refugee camps, some of which are extraordinary in scale. Our 2019 funding includes a contribution of €2.5 million-----

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: That was not my question. My question involved where it is going.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am getting to that.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: Some colleagues have been there and we got a different perspective so I was wondering, particularly in view of the meetings that will happen regarding promoting peace.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am providing some context. I am about to tell the Deputy where the money has gone. The 2019 funding includes a contribution of €2.5 million to the UN Turkey humanitarian fund for the Syrian response, which supports the emergency cross-border response to the current humanitarian situation in north west Syria. Ireland also supports the EU's humanitarian response to Syria through its annual contributions to the UN institutions. In total, the EU has mobilised almost €17 billion since 2012 for humanitarian, stabilisation and resilience assistance to support Syrians inside the country and in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt. This figure includes a 2019 pledge of €2.57 billion from the EU budget. Ireland's support is channelled through a range of partners, including NGOs, UN organisations and the International Red Cross and the Red Crescent movement. Since 2012, 45 rapid response corps members have been deployed. That is where our funding goes.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank the Tánaiste for his presentation. I will touch on some matters that have not been raised in great detail. Regarding the migrant crisis, which is a significant challenge for Europe and individual EU member states, in his opening statement, the Tánaiste

said we need to find a consensus based on solidarity and responsibility and that addressing the migrant crisis requires deeper political, economic and development relations between the EU and our partners, particularly in Africa. He alluded to population growth in Africa. I will preface my question by referring to some of the scenes we witnessed in our own country with regard to attacks on and opposition to direct provision centres. We can be proud of our humanitarian track record and our approach to dealing with vulnerable people and those who have had to flee their countries of origin. My party and I are extremely concerned about some of the attacks on venues and places that were to have operated as direct provision centres. In particular, I am concerned that there is a sinister infiltration of communities by people with ulterior motives. I respect and defend any community's right to articulate concerns around service provisions. That is fair enough. Their fears may not always be to the extent that is being articulated. We have seen how when direct provision centres were rolled out in some communities, those fears were not found to be of the scale or level expressed heretofore. We are now a multicultural country. We have a large non-Irish and non-European population that contributes hugely to our society and economy. We must only look at the most recent local elections where a number of people who emigrated to this country were elected to positions in local government, which is positive. We had some in my own party in Limerick while the Tánaiste's party and others also have them. I welcome that because it is a positive change. I am couching that in terms of the migration challenge faced by Europe. I know direct provision largely comes under the Department of Justice and Equality but immigration is something we are discussing here. We know the background and history of direct provision. It is far from perfect and has had significant problems. Over the years, the Government has tried to improve it. An alternative mechanism for dealing with people who present themselves here is not as obvious as people would like to think it is. It is a complex issue. Can the Tánaiste give us more detail about how the EU will address this issue? This country is playing its part by taking its quota. With regard to the whole scale of it, the Tánaiste spoke about finding "a consensus based on solidarity, responsibility and international law". I ask him to put a little more flesh on those bones.

My final question relates to the Middle East peace process, which has been raised by previous speakers. We have raised it with the Tánaiste on a number of occasions. I acknowledge that he has been vocal on it. I also acknowledge that he has been critical of the stagnation or non-existence of the process and of the continued illegal expansion of settlements into the occupied territories. He told me in the Dáil almost two weeks ago that he shared the despair that was being articulated by me and by other Deputies. When people from Israel purport to speak with authority, it is hard to believe what they are saying because their actions are completely different. I suggest the Government needs to rethink its approach to the occupied territories Bill because the strategy of being vocal and criticising is not having any tangible effect. I wonder whether we could look at other avenues. For example, I was briefed by Trócaire recently on the whole area of human rights and environmental due diligence legislation. Could we consider the option of having a discussion with our European partners to demonstrate that the practices which are being rolled out offend human rights and potentially offend environmental best practice?

I ask the Tánaiste to respond to the two matters I have raised. As other members have covered Brexit and other topics, I do not intend to go into them. I was present in the Dáil this morning when the Tánaiste addressed a number of issues that were put to him by my party's deputy leader, Deputy Calleary.

Chairman: I understand Senator Bacik has another commitment, so I will take her questions now.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I thank the Chair. I appreciate that. I thank the Tánaiste for his rapid overview of many areas. As he said, it is an enormous brief to cover without getting into the elephant in the room, which is Brexit. I spoke on Brexit in the Seanad on Tuesday during a debate with the Tánaiste and the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee. Like Deputy Niall Collins, I will not go into Brexit other than to express the view that the Tánaiste has expressed. I do not see how the British Government's commitments under the Good Friday Agreement are legally reconcilable with the current proposals we have seen from it.

I would like to raise a few key points. Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan spoke about this country's record with regard to overseas development aid. I hope next week's budget will bring further good news on meeting our overseas development aid commitments and target. This committee has done a great deal of work on the Irish Aid programme and I want to express my strong support for that.

The crisis in Syria has been mentioned by previous speakers. I would like to refer specifically to the enormous Russian support for the Assad regime. Civilians and hospitals have been targeted by Russian and Syrian regime forces. Is there any prospect of further EU action, such as particular sanctions, against Russia and against the Assad regime? The Minister said in his opening remarks that this was discussed at the Foreign Affairs Council in February. It is clear that since then, things have changed for the worse in particular areas. Notably, we have seen an escalation of bombardment in Idlib. We have seen significant increases in refugee numbers. I have been contacted by someone who has just returned from a refugee camp in Lebanon. The Tánaiste has spoken about his visit to see the terrible conditions there. Could more be done at EU level to achieve a peaceful resolution?

I raised a Commencement matter with the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, in the Seanad on Tuesday. It concerned a family in this country that has family members in Idlib. Permission has been granted for the family members in question to be brought to Ireland. Physically, it is almost impossible for people in that position to achieve safe passage. I have sent details of this case to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Department of Justice and Equality. The bigger issue here is that although we have stepped up by making a commitment to resettle refugees from Syria, particularly under the family programme, we have not come close to meeting the targets we have set. I know we can do more to ensure safe passage for people who have already been given permission to come here. I ask the Tánaiste to respond to this specific question.

I would like to refer briefly to the Middle East. I was glad to hear the Tánaiste's comments condemning the expansion of settlements in Palestine. I would like more progress to be made in this State on the occupied territories Bill and on the recognition of the Palestinian state, for which there would be strong support from my party and many other parties.

One year on from the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, I urge the Tánaiste to do more at EU level to condemn the regime in Saudi Arabia. I recently met human rights activists from Bahrain who argue that Ireland should do more to condemn human rights abuses by the Bahraini Government, particularly abuses of political prisoners and discrimination against women. Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan has raised the Church in Chains issue in China.

Have we seen any progress on the situation in Venezuela, about which the Tánaiste spoke? This committee has heard about the destabilising effect that events in Venezuela are having on neighbouring countries in the region, including Colombia. Many of us have had strong engagement with the Colombian ambassador and with non-governmental organisations and human

rights groups in the region. It is clear that the situation in Venezuela is problematic for the peace process in Colombia. Mr. Eamon Gilmore has been before the joint committee to discuss this significant issue.

It is clear that all the work Ireland is doing to promote human rights internationally is very important. It is important that we continue to have a strong record on the protection and promotion of human rights internationally, particularly if we get a seat on the UN Security Council.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Deputy Niall Collins asked about the migrant crisis. My understanding is that a temporary deal was reached at the meeting in Malta. This deal will be presented to the Council of Ministers in Luxembourg on 8 October next. I hope we will be able to buy into that and support it. I think there is a broader question here. The temporary deal essentially involves trying to respond to the immediacy of the migrant problem in the Mediterranean. The question of what the EU collectively should do to try to deal with this issue is a much bigger one. Over the next 20 years, one of the defining issues for the EU will be the manner in which it deals with dramatic population growth in its neighbourhood. People in the Middle East and particularly on the continent of Africa have the ability to move around and want the kind of lifestyle the EU provides. It is going to be difficult to contend with this challenge. Deals will continue to be done between the EU and Turkey. In some ways, this is far from ideal but it is a pragmatic response as we try to deal with the vast numbers of refugees who have come from Syria and other conflict zones. There is a constant balancing act for politicians in this regard. I am very liberal when it comes to migration, but I understand that an approach to migration that is too open and too generous tends to get a response at election time from an electorate that can be quite conservative on these issues when it is asked to change and to accommodate large numbers of people in a short space of time. We need to accept that this is what happened in Italy, which had quite a generous approach to disembarkation and was dealing with substantial numbers of people who were coming across the Mediterranean. Virtually all of the disembarkation from Irish vessels was into Italian ports. The Italian Government asked over and over again for solidarity and support from other member states, but it did not get it. The electorate gave its answer when it put in place a Government that takes a hard line on this issue. We have to find a way to take a human approach to refugees and asylum seekers across the EU. We have to bring people with us while doing so. That is one of the issues that Deputy O'Callaghan referred to in the context of the concerning campaigns we have seen emerging to oppose direction provision nationally. In other countries, Ireland is often pointed to as a model for the integration of refugees in towns and villages. While we criticise the standard of accommodation in some direct provision centres, it is not living in the real world for some to call for an end to direct provision as if we can somehow magic over 7,000 people from the system and into their own homes overnight. If one compares how we treat and accommodate migrants versus most other member states, in particular those that have a great many migrants, our direct provision centres are of a significantly better standard. That is not to say they are good enough. We must continue to improve the standard. This is not only about accommodation but also about healthcare supports, social integration, becoming part of communities and so on. We must be careful about how we interact with the communities we ask to accommodate lots of new people. We have probably made some mistakes in that regard. People have legitimate concerns around how a small town or village can accommodate large numbers of new residents. We have to get better at this. If we do not, we will run out of accommodation. We have more than 1,000 refugees and asylum seekers in temporary hotel and bed and breakfast accommodation because we have too few structured direct provision centres. We must address that, be upfront about it, and work with communities to make it viable. I appeal to other political leaders in particular to offer leadership within communities rather than reinforce people's fears. Many of those fears are based on

rumour and inaccurate information. I thank Deputy Niall Collins for his comments in this area, which were both accurate and fair. The Government is very conscious of that.

Every member of the committee is concerned about the Middle East peace process. We are open to any proposal, whether legislative or some other initiative, but I cannot support anything I do not believe to be legally sound, such as the occupied territories Bill. The Bill is not implementable and would not change anything. In fact, it would undermine Ireland's capacity to facilitate change. I understand the motivation and frustration behind the Bill and have spoken to Senator Black about that on numerous occasions. No Government, however, can knowingly implement legislation its Attorney General tells it is not legally sound. While we would consider it if we thought otherwise, it is still the case that my only objective in the Middle East peace process is to make something positive happen. I have no other objective. That was the case in New York where I had an opportunity to meet Jared Kushner, with whom I had a long meeting at which the Irish view was made clear with regard to any new peace initiative the USA might bring forward if and when a new Israeli government takes office. I speak regularly to Arab leaders, in particular the Jordanian minister, about what Ireland can do to be constructive within the EU. That is what we are trying to do and we will continue to seek to play that role at UN and EU level. We will do it in such a way as to keep an open dialogue with Israel and Palestinian leaders. In fact, I am meeting the Palestinian ambassador to the UN after this meeting. If members have ideas and proposals, we will happily look at them. If they are helpful and legally sound, we will certainly look at progressing them.

I was asked about Iran and Russia supporting the Assad regime and Syria. The role played by Iran and Russia in Syria has served to prolong the conflict and, thus, the suffering of Syrian people. They have assisted the regime in the violent suppression of its own people, including through support for military attacks. Syria will be discussed at the Foreign Affairs Council in October. Sanctions are already in place on Syria and they have not been lifted. There will come a time at some point when we have to recognise that a transition is taking place and look at how the EU can support it in a responsible way. We have called on all parties with influence on the Syrian regime to exert that influence to ensure civilians are protected and to encourage the Syrian Government to engage fully with the UN-led peace process. We want a political transformation over time that can facilitate significant EU financial and development support to rebuild a country that has been devastated in such a tragic way.

I was asked about ODA. I will be honest and upfront about next week's budget, as I was with NGOs yesterday. I am an open book on ODA. I want us to get to 0.7%. We delivered an extra €116 million to the ODA budget last year and will have to make average increases of approximately €150 million between now and 2030. These are huge numbers but that is what we want to do and are committed to doing. Next week's budget, however, will not be a normal one. We are putting a budget together on the basis of a pessimistic outlook for a no-deal scenario with 0.7% economic growth in 2020, which is, in essence, no growth when one accounts for inflation and so on. As such, expenditure increases across many Departments, including mine, will be much lower than would otherwise have been the case. That will go for ODA as well as everything else. That is not to say we will not increase ODA next week, which we will. I am determined not to go backwards on the percentage of gross national income, GNI. We are currently at 0.31% of GNI and will have to spend more money on ODA simply to hold it at that percentage. I am insisting that we do not go backwards on our journey to 2030 and 0.7%. We spend well over €800 million a year and will add to that next week. However, it will not be anything like what we were able to do last year, which was more than €100 million. It will be a lot less, I am afraid, reflecting the reality across all Departments of what a no-deal Brexit could

mean. We will have to make very significant financial provision to support vulnerable sectors should the disruption of a no-deal Brexit take effect. We must also factor in 0% growth. Unless it is hugely irresponsible, a government does not increase spending by 3% to 5% if growth is flat. In recent years, we have consistently increased expenditure in line with growth in the economy. That will be the same next week or very close to it. I do not want to be negative. We are still committed to being where we need to be by 2030 but it is important to ensure expectations next week are realistic.

I was asked about the Khashoggi murder. Yesterday marked the first anniversary of the death of Jamal Khashoggi and, one year on, we are still waiting for those responsible for his murder to be held to account. That is the truth of it. From the beginning, Ireland has supported calls for a thorough, credible and transparent investigation into this murder, which must get to the facts of the case and ensure there is full accountability for those responsible. While a trial is under way in Saudi Arabia, Irish officials have noted in contacts with officials there the need for greater transparency. The report of the UN special rapporteur, which was released in June, made for sobering reading. She concluded that the murder of Jamal Khashoggi was premeditated and overseen by high-level Saudi officials and that Turkey's efforts to investigate it have been undermined by Saudi Arabia. The lengthy report is comprehensive and includes a number of detailed recommendations that require careful consideration. This incident should not have happened. The international community needs to be firm and consistent in insisting on trying to get answers as opposed to allowing for some kind of cover-up and for all to move on, and we have been consistent in that regard.

On human rights in Bahrain, last week I met the Foreign Minister for Bahrain in New York where we had quite a good discussion on this issue. We have raised the issue at a senior level. We want a good relationship with the Bahraini Government. There is a recognition that there are human rights considerations and concerns that need to be responded to and addressed. I wish to reassure people that the issue of human rights was very much the topic of conversation.

In terms of Venezuela, this is just a calamity. More than 5 million refugees or migrants have left Venezuela. A huge number of them have poured into Colombia, in particular, but also into many other neighbouring countries. The situation is causing huge tension and resentment. Initially, extraordinary generosity was shown to the Venezuelans. I believe that it is the sheer number of people that neighbouring countries must deal with has caused all sorts of challenges and problems, despite the fact that the countries have been extraordinary generous by and large. In the Dáil we have had some debates to discuss our approach. We recognise that there has to be a political solution. Pressure and sanctions alone are not going to do this. A talks process is under way. Some people are sceptical of the process but we are not. The Oslo process is largely taking place in Barbados and it is a vehicle to find a way forward. We want to continue to encourage engagement with that process. I know that the Norwegian Government is very committed to it and I hope we will see a non-violent outcome to what has been a pretty awful episode in Venezuelan history for so many Venezuelans. I think that is everything.

Senator Billy Lawless: The Tánaiste has already answered most of my questions. As he will know, migration is my area. I am really concerned about the fierce toxic anti-immigration sentiment in the United States, which this year has reduced the intake of refugees to 18,000 refugees from a high of 100,000 refugees by the former Administration. The anti-immigrant sentiment has probably fuelled the protests that we saw here in the last few weeks with regard to our acceptance of asylum seekers and refugees. As the Tánaiste will know, the centre is in my home country. Sinister right-wing activists have infiltrated and fuelled these protests. As

he has said, dialogue must take place with local people. I think Ireland has done quite well in terms of direct provision for asylum-seekers and refugees. As he also asked, what are we going to do with the 6,000 people? What is our quota of asylum-seekers? What numbers do we take in on a yearly basis?

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: What is the Tánaiste’s view of sanctions? Sanctions sound great in theory but, in practice, hurt ordinary people more than they hurt those they are directed at. Part of the issue in Venezuela are the sanctions imposed by the United States. Such sanctions have caused an awful lot of difficulty in Cuba. As far as America is concerned, the Cold War continues. It is the same when it comes to Iran. Does America solve issues or make things worse and harden people’s attitudes?

Chairman: Relatively recently this committee wrote to the Tánaiste’s Department about Georgia and the provocations and incursions that have taken place, particularly in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Were those issues kept on the agenda of the Foreign Affairs Council?

Deputy Simon Coveney: In terms of migration, I agree with Senator Lawless on the issue. We all need to speak up about the issue. Ireland has been remarkably responsible about migration generally.

Senator Billy Lawless: Yes.

Deputy Simon Coveney: There are always exceptions, am I right? Somebody will try to get a headline and be in sync with a community that might be worried or angry about something that they have not been told about and feel something has been sprung on them. That is a human reaction. Communities, by and large, will be reasonable in this space if they are treated with respect, given information in advance, if it is clearly explained how something will work and told how many people are coming. Also, it must be explained how things like education, school spaces, healthcare and so on will be provided. There is an onus on the State to manage the communications of this more effectively. There are lots of really good examples of direct provision centres located in towns around Ireland where there has been fantastic integration. One of the Ministers who sat at the Cabinet table this week explained that there was a welcome event and party held for the new citizens in town at a direct provision centre, which was a hotel, and is literally 100 yd from his house. There was instant integration and the placement has worked really well. Such a situation can be replicated across Ireland. Irish people are generous but want to know what is going on, and that is the challenge for us.

There are sinister elements too. There is a far-right element in Ireland. They have not got much political traction but they are active. They are racist and they will look to stoke up trouble in communities on the back of rumours and fear, which we need to combat head-on because that kind of politics is very active in other countries. Fortunately for us, such activity has been much more successful in other countries than here. Most of the time Irish people have no time for that kind of lack of generosity or, in some cases, bigotry and racism. Whether we like it or not it is there, is under the surface and it will take advantage of vulnerable communities if we do not manage these things properly. It is a big challenge for all parties to work together to ensure that migration and the politics surrounding same are not part of the main political discourse at election time in Ireland. We are planning for a country that will have an extra 1 million people in the next two decades. Half of that extra 1 million people, in terms of an addition to Ireland’s population, will not have been born in Ireland. Today, 17% of our population was not born here and that percentage is increasing all of the time, which is good. It is a really good thing in terms of the way Ireland sees the world and has an outward-looking open approach to how we interact

with other countries and so on. It has allowed us to have a platform for not only international trade but also a much more open approach towards how society lives and tolerates difference. I am sure Senator Lawless understands that only too well from the work that he has done in the US and here.

Senator Billy Lawless: Yes.

Deputy Simon Coveney: In terms of numbers, although we are not bound by the relevant EU justice and home affairs legislation, Ireland voluntarily opted into an EU relocation decision that was made in 2015 and agreed to take up to 4,000 migrants. To date, Ireland has admitted more than 2,600 people under EU relocation and resettlement programmes. It is expected that the rest of these numbers will be filled by the end of 2019 through pledges for programme refugees and by approximately 630 family reunification arrivals under the new Irish Refugee Protection Programme, IRPP, humanitarian admissions programme. That is a structured relocation programme for migrants. Asylum seeking is a separate issue. Anybody from anywhere can arrive in Ireland and can claim that they are fleeing persecution and therefore claim asylum. We have a legal obligation to go through the process and to look after the needs of those people during that process, which is what direct provision was set up for 20 years ago or more. As I said, there are many countries, including in the EU, that have far fewer supports in place for asylum seekers than we have. That is not to say we are doing great or anything; we can always do better. There is no such thing as a quota for asylum seekers. The numbers who arrive have to be dealt with under international law. That also has to involve, in some circumstances, deportation. We cannot have a credible migration policy unless we are honest with people. We accommodate people who are genuine asylum seekers and we have got to say to people who are not, who are economic migrants but who do not come here under the appropriate visa programmes, we have got to say to those people that we are sorry but there is a way to come to Ireland under a work visa programme and if they do not qualify, they have to go home. If we are not consistent on that, it is hard to get the broader public to buy into a generous migration strategy, which I believe we should have, by the way. I am very liberal when it comes to migration but it is all well and good saying that; we have to have a system that works. We have to be able to accommodate the numbers who are here. At the moment, we are right at the edge of that in terms of direct provision and not having enough places, which is why we need new direct provision centres. We have to work with communities to make that happen.

In terms of sanctions, many sanctions target individuals or their financial assets through travel bans or through specific targeting of individuals in power. I think there is a role for sanctions. Without sanctions, we have very few tools in the toolkit, frankly. If we are simply appealing to a dictator, in some cases, to change his ways, to have elections, to respect international law, but actually have no means to use a stick as well as a carrot, if we are ruling out military intervention which I believe we should, sanctions do play a role. Sanctions have changed the approach of governments and individuals in different parts of the world. We need to be careful with how sanctions are used. Sometimes they can contribute to the misery of the broader public in a country. That is why they need to be constantly assessed. If we are not going to agree with military intervention, we have to look at other ways of persuasion or facilitating change in line with the standards that we should be expecting in the European Union. I think there is a role for sanctions but we need to constantly assess how they are working and how targeted they are.

Finally on Georgia, the prolongation of so-called frozen conflicts remains a source of concern. They pose a challenge to reform efforts and undermine stability in the wider region. This is in respect of the ongoing Russia-Georgia conflict. There remain serious challenges regarding

the situation of internally displaced persons and of human rights in the breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhasia. In recent weeks there has been an escalation along the administrative boundary lines with the Russia-backed breakaway regions, with both sides reinforcing checkpoints and security infrastructure. The EU has called for both sides to show maximum restraint and avoid escalation. Technical discussions at the incident prevention and response mechanism have de-escalated the situation somewhat but tensions remain high. The EU continues to engage as co-chair of the Geneva international discussions, including the continued presence on the ground of the EU monitoring mission, which has three Irish members. This is something we will continue to watch closely and which I will continue to discuss with my EU colleagues to ensure that we keep it on the agenda.

Chairman: I thank the Tánaiste. I have a few quick comments in regard to Brexit. It is slightly ironic that the British Prime Minister entitled his letter “A fair and reasonable compromise: UK proposals for a new protocol on Ireland-Northern Ireland”. In my view, what the British Government is now putting forward is neither fair nor reasonable, nor even a compromise. It is a considerable renegeing on the commitments made by Britain and agreed with the European Union in the 2017 joint report. Paragraph 49 of that report states:

The United Kingdom remains committed to protecting North-South cooperation and to its guarantee of avoiding a hard border. Any future arrangements must be compatible with these overarching requirements. [...] In the absence of agreed solutions, the United Kingdom will maintain full alignment with those rules of the Internal Market and the Customs Union which, now or in the future, support North-South cooperation, the all-island economy and the protection of the 1998 Agreement.

More and more people, particularly in the Border communities and the community where I live, feel that a hard, crash-out Brexit may be less than four weeks away. There is a great fear of that happening, as the Tánaiste is well aware. In regard to the Prime Minister’s proposals, the only political party in Northern Ireland supporting them is the Democratic Unionist Party.

Along with political parties in Northern Ireland, we have to be cognisant of the views of representative organisations that have voiced their strong opposition. They include Manufacturing NI, Retail NI and Northern Ireland Retail Consortium. What is proposed at present will damage the Northern Ireland economy and will also damage two decades plus of painstaking political and cross-community progress made under the Good Friday Agreement. What damages the Northern Ireland economy damages our economy as well as, thankfully, both of our economies are so interdependent because of the most valuable development in the all-Ireland economy and the growth of business on an all-Ireland basis. If we think of the stark remarks of Manufacturing NI, it tweeted last night: “Frankly the proposals are worse than No Deal for Northern Ireland businesses.” Indeed I gather from some of the limited commentary I listened to at the Tory Party conference that some of the British Ministers saw Brexit as an opportunity for widespread divergence between Britain and the European Union in terms of standards and conditions. Hopefully that will not happen but if such divergence emerged, then communities such as those I represent would be deeply adversely affected. It would result in a clear breach of the Good Friday Agreement.

One comment that we must be mindful of and that I hope will be brought through right to the end of the negotiations was President Juncker’s statement in the European Parliament last April that the UK must fully respect the letter and spirit of the Good Friday Agreement. President Juncker’s stress on both the letter and the spirit of the agreement is greatly important and

significant. I sincerely hope there will be no deviation from that position and that EU solidarity with the Government's position and the position of the Oireachtas will be maintained. I said at our first committee meeting after the Brexit referendum in June 2016 that for a person who grew up in the Troubles and lived in the Border communities, and who has had the privilege of representing two counties with a long land border, the psychology of going back to borders as part of our everyday narrative is terribly damaging. We sincerely hope that does not transpire. We wish the Tánaiste well in the continued difficult task he has in ensuring that Ireland's interests are fully protected.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank the Chairman. I agree with every word he has just said. I am very familiar with paragraph 49 of the December 2017 agreement. I quote it all the time to people. We worked really hard to get it agreed. I think the then Prime Minister, Ms May, understood the complexity of trying to protect the Good Friday Agreement and relationships on the island of Ireland at the same time as delivering Brexit and, because of that, gave that commitment and the commitment in paragraph 50, the next paragraph, to try to reassure unionism. What Prime Minister Johnson has proposed falls significantly short of that commitment. That is why I have said that while I regard Prime Minister Johnson's proposal as a serious one and an effort to try to move negotiations forward, there is still a need for another big step to ensure that an outcome here that we can all sign up to, I hope, is consistent with the paragraph the Chairman has just quoted and the commitments that have been made in the context of the backstop. If we are to replace the backstop with something else, it must do the same job, which is to reassure Border communities that they will not face Border infrastructure and the disruption it would bring in the future. It must also ensure that mechanisms in place in Northern Ireland to try to mitigate the damage of Brexit are not obstructed by a minority against the majority will. That would not be democratic or consistent with the Good Friday Agreement. The challenge for us is to try to find a way forward that unionists and nationalists, and members of the communities that are neither, can support. Ultimately, though, we must ensure we do not go back to a border on the island of Ireland being a political debating point and all that flows from that in terms of the corrosive impact on relationships and disruption to trade, which, as the Chairman knows, has been such a reinforcer of normality and peace in the Border region for the past two decades.

This is difficult stuff, but we want to work with the British Prime Minister, and of course we are working as part of Michel Barnier's team. We will do everything we can to try to get a deal in the next week or so. It must, however, be the right deal in order that we do not let people down and find that the Border becomes the topic of debate in Ireland for the foreseeable future, with all the divisions that flow from that and the calls for more radical change and so in in Northern Ireland, which I do not believe we are ready for, and I think the Chairman is of the same view. These are difficult times. We are writing the history of what the relationship between Britain and Ireland and between the EU and the UK will look like for the next 20 years, and we need to get it right.

Chairman: On behalf of the joint committee, I thank the Tánaiste for his initial presentation and the very comprehensive manner in which he dealt with all the queries colleagues raised.

The joint committee adjourned at 4.04 p.m. until 10 a.m. on Thursday, 17 October 2019.