

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN ROGHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS TRÁDÁIL

SELECT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE

Dé Céadaoin, 28 Eanáir 2015

Wednesday, 28 January 2015

The Select Committee met at 2.30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Eric Byrne,	Deputy Dan Neville,
Deputy Seán Crowe,	Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan,
Deputy Jimmy Deenihan (<i>Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade</i>),	Deputy Ruairí Quinn,
Deputy Bernard J. Durkan,	Deputy Sean Sherlock (<i>Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade</i>)
Deputy Charles Flanagan (<i>Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade</i>),	Deputy Brendan Smith.

DEPUTY PAT BREEN IN THE CHAIR.

Estimates for Public Services 2015

Vote 27 - International Co-operation (Revised)

Vote 28 - Foreign Affairs and Trade (Revised)

Vice Chairman: We have a quorum. Apologies have been received from Deputy Olivia Mitchell, who is abroad on official business. On 18 December 2014 the Dáil ordered that the Revised Estimates for public services in respect of the following Votes be referred to this committee for consideration: Vote 27 - International Co-operation; and Vote 28 - Foreign Affairs and Trade. At today's meeting, the select committee will consider these Estimates and report back to the Dáil.

I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Jimmy Deenihan, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Charles Flanagan, the Minister of State, Deputy Sean Sherlock, and their officials. The Chairman and Secretary General will be along shortly. We will hear opening remarks from the Minister, Deputy Charles Flanagan, before going on to deal with Vote 28 on a programme-by-programme basis. On completion of Vote 28, we will proceed to Vote 27 and consider it in a similar fashion.

I ask members to silence their mobile phones and switch them off as they interfere with the broadcasting system. I remind those in the Public Gallery to do likewise. I refer to the normal citation in regard to the naming of people outside the Houses in a way in which they might be identified in a fashion which might not be complementary. It is understood that all members acknowledge and agree to that. I call on the Minister, Deputy Charles Flanagan, to make his brief opening remarks on the overall expenditure in the Department before proceeding to Vote 28.

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Charles Flanagan): I thank the Vice Chairman. I am pleased to be here today to present to the select committee the Revised Estimates for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for 2015. I trust that the committee will endorse the priorities and output targets we have set for ourselves for 2015. It is my first time I have had the pleasure of meeting the select committee to present the Revised Estimates for the Department. In my remarks, as the Vice Chairman said, I will focus on Vote 28 - Foreign Affairs and Trade, along with my colleagues, the Minister of State, Deputy Deenihan, who will deal with specific issues such as the diaspora and his responsibilities therein, and the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, who will address Vote 27 - International Co-operation.

I appreciate that, as the Vice Chairman said, a formal, lengthy introductory statement is not required, but I would like to confine myself to some initial comments outlining the situation facing the Department at this point, before introducing the various programmes as managed by my Department. As the committee will be aware, the overall gross current Estimate for 2015 is €681 million. This compares with an Estimate of €691 million in the previous year and represents a reduction of 1.45%. The allocation for spending on administration has decreased from €175 million to €171 million and I am satisfied that, despite the continuing tight budgetary situation, we can deliver on our targets for 2015.

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A significant proportion of Vote 28 Estimates, some 19.2%, is made up of mandatory contributions to international organisations, including the United Nations. These figures are often very difficult to project for a number of reasons. First, the budgetary process involved requires us to make the estimate of costs well in advance of when payments are ultimately finalised. Second, in the case of UN peacekeeping missions, new and further missions can be added in response to emerging crises. Third, and perhaps most relevant at this point in time, is the current dollar-euro exchange rate. As the committee will appreciate, adverse currency movements have a dramatic impact on the final amount dispersed for large payments such as those made in dollars to the United Nations.

Notwithstanding those three points, my Department tracks all the relevant issues closely and I am fully focused on delivering the objectives for 2015 within the reduced budgetary allocation. In the course of this year we will be continuing to build on Ireland's success in exiting the EU-IMF programme. My Department has been centrally involved - particularly through the agency of our diplomatic and consular network - in this achievement. The task of restoring our economic fortunes and recovering lost ground internationally is not yet complete and, as the committee will appreciate, there is no room for complacency in this regard. Export-led growth will be key to generating employment and sustainable growth at home. We readily accept the task of redoubling our efforts to support business internationally. I will outline later the steps we propose to take in terms of achieving our goal of sustainable economic growth into the future.

I am pleased to report that we achieved our priority targets for Vote 28 within budget and that savings will be returned to the Exchequer. Savings mainly arose on the opening of new missions and on the lower than expected costs of United Nations contributions.

In 2014 there was further conflict and division - which caused unprecedented humanitarian crises in the Middle East - but efforts to achieve progress in respect of the Middle East peace process and the deteriorating political situation in Ukraine are ongoing. Each of these matters will be a significant focus of the attention of the Department in the coming year. I intend to visit both the Middle East and Ukraine in the coming months. While in Poland yesterday, I had a brief opportunity to engage with President Poroshenko of Ukraine. A special meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council is due to take place in Brussels tomorrow.

Members will be aware that my departmental officials and I were centrally involved in the recent negotiations which led to the Stormont House Agreement on a way forward for Northern Ireland. As was noted when this matter was discussed in the House last week, the agreement represents a great opportunity to restore effective partnership government in Northern Ireland, advance genuine reconciliation between divided communities and progress economic prosperity for all.

International development will remain central to our foreign policy in 2015. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, whose role is crucial in this regard, will outline his position later. I wish to acknowledge the lead role the plays on behalf of Ireland in the context of the country's official development assistance. I am proud that Ireland has taken up the role of co-chairing the vital global development negotiations currently under way at the United Nations in New York. The challenge now will be to ensure we use this leadership role to enable the full membership of the United Nations to adopt a new set of global development goals in September, with the ambition of ending extreme poverty and hunger in the world by 2030. On a previous occasion I referred to the Representing the Global Island conference and the launch of the foreign policy review which accompanied it. The conference in question included a number

of business round-table discussions in which Irish companies, State agencies and the heads of our diplomatic missions participated. These discussions focused on emerging markets, Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

An underlying theme in the context of our contacts with the global Irish community is that if Ireland wishes to be successful, then we must continue to go out and engage with the world. We cannot afford the luxury of waiting for the world to come to us. In this regard, the very important work done by the Minister of State, Deputy Deenihan, in engaging with the diaspora across the globe ensures that we have an ongoing, positive and active engagement with Irish citizens abroad and the communities in which they currently live and play a key role.

The review of foreign policy offers a progressive and forward-looking vision of Ireland's place in the world and sets out key areas of focus for the Government's global engagement to help secure a peaceful and prosperous future for the Irish people. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the input in respect of and valuable contribution of this committee to the review. During the consultation exercise, we received detailed inputs from the Joint Committee on European Affairs and the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. The form and quality of the inputs received during the consultation process is testament to the depth of interest in Ireland's foreign policy. In the coming months I intend to bring forward a series of initiatives to advance further the goals set out in the review, with an initial evaluation of progress at the end of the year. Work on the review of the policy relating to the diaspora is ongoing. We will be discussing that matter later this afternoon.

In the context of the Revised Estimates for 2015 and the stated targets set out therein, the committee will note that in the coming 12 months the Department intends to sustain its efforts to promote Ireland's economic and trade interests, encourage the achievement of reconciliation and co-operation on this island, advance national priorities for international development, peace, security and human rights, provide passport and consular services to our citizens and continue engagement with and provide support for the Irish community abroad. I now propose to introduce each of the programmes under Vote 28 and provide a brief overview of our priorities in respect of each.

Vice Chairman: We will take the programmes in sequence.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: The commitment to advancing Ireland's trade and economic interests in Europe and internationally is set out in programme A. The amount allocated for the programme in 2015 is €48.6 million, a slight increase on the allocation for 2014. Last year, 19 ministerial-led Enterprise Ireland trade missions took place to countries which have been identified as priority markets for Irish exporting companies. This compares to 18 trade missions in 2013 and 16 in 2012. These were additional to other non-ministerial led Enterprise Ireland trade missions and events. The promotion of Irish trade and investment also featured significantly in the programme of high level visits throughout the year. The latter included the State visits by the President to the UK and China in April and December, respectively, and visits abroad by the Taoiseach and Cabinet Ministers. These trade missions are supported actively by our diplomatic missions on the ground. In the event that a Minister from my Department leads a mission, our trade and promotion division at headquarters is actively involved. The St. Patrick's Day period presents a very important opportunity for promotional activity on the part of our embassy network. In 2014 the Taoiseach, 18 Government Ministers and I undertook 27 programmes across North America. I was not there as a member of Government, but I had the opportunity to act as a substitute. I assure all Ministers and Ministers of State that we will have a full and active programme of positive engagement this year. We intend to maintain a similar

level of promotional activity during the 2015 St. Patrick's Day period. The programme is currently being prepared and will be announced in the near future.

Vice Chairman: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I welcome the Minister's opening statement. I concur with him with regard to the importance of the St. Patrick's Day period and the opportunity to market Ireland abroad.

Does the Department have an input in trade negotiations at EU level? I refer to the proposal that the EU will participate in new trade agreements such as an EU-US agreement and an EU-Colombia-Peru agreement. Such input seems to be entirely within the remit of the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. I would like an overview of how the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade works in conjunction with the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. An agreement between the EU and the US would have great potential but there are issues of concern to us as a country, particularly about the agrifood and beef sectors.

We had a discussion in the Dáil on the proposed agreement with Colombia and Peru and human rights was the major issue of concern to Members. The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation has unanimously put forward a recommendation that we do not support the trade agreement and that is being voted on in the Dáil. I welcome the Minister's presentation which dealt with those specific issues.

Will the Minister update us on the Atlantic corridor project which has been on the agenda for some time? He might let us know if there have been any tangible results or benefits to date from the project or if it is still in the early stages of development.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I welcome the Minister, the Ministers of State and staff from the Department.

Vice Chairman: I remind members that we are here to discuss six programmes and I urge them to condense their comments as much as possible.

Deputy Seán Crowe: It would be remiss of us if we did not mention the fact that a UN soldier has been killed in the Golan Heights. It is important that we extend our sympathy to the family of the Spanish soldier involved. When the news first broke everyone was worried an Irish soldier had been killed but a family has suffered a loss.

Vice Chairman: That subject is more appropriate for our discussion of section D.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Perhaps it is.

Vice Chairman: To get through these programmes as quickly as possible and to give everyone a fair chance, I urge the Deputy to discuss programme A, which deals with promoting Ireland's economic and trade interests in Europe and internationally.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Is the Vice Chairman finished?

Vice Chairman: Yes.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I ask him to give me a bit of leeway. I do not understand the idea of dealing with Vote 28 first instead of Vote 27. As I mentioned to the previous Minister, we are supposed to scrutinise the programme. I am not criticising the Department's staff but we need

to look at the measure again. This is not a matter for today but I want the Minister to comment. We are keen to look at the scrutiny of other countries and how they deal with budgets and so on, and similarly with this matter. I ask the Minister and Ministers of State to note my point. It is important and I presume other members share my view.

I will now deal with programme A, promoting Ireland's economic and trade interests. I noticed that the trade promotion fund focused a lot on priority Asian countries. Can the Minister outline which Asian countries?

A trade delegation from Ireland visited Cuba a number of years ago. Are there plans for another visit now that there has been a breakthrough in talks between Cuba and America?

The Colombian economic agreement was mentioned. Is the Minister concerned about the mechanisms for triggering concern about, for example, rights abuse when it comes to agreements?

Vice Chairman: I must stop the Deputy because I want to give everyone an opportunity to contribute. The Deputy has strayed into the area of international peace, security and human rights. I ask him to stick to discussing the programme on the promotion of Ireland's economic and trade interests in Europe and internationally. He will have an opportunity to contribute on each programme as it arises.

Deputy Seán Crowe: My queries were about international matters.

Vice Chairman: I call Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan. I urge everyone to concentrate on the first programme and remind them we are required to scrutinise each programme individually.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: I have questions on trade missions. Will the Minister outline his plans going forward? Will he identify what targets are being looked at and where? It will be interesting to learn which parts of the world are being concentrated on. As a member of this committee, I know many other parts of the world are very interested in trading with Ireland because of its reputation.

Everyone is in agreement about what happens during St. Patrick's week. As I said last year, we need a St. Patrick's week to promote small and medium-sized enterprises here. How does the Department quantify or qualify what comes from the missions that take place over St. Patrick's week?

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: My questions relate to the future because the Estimates have been signed off for this year. First, I acknowledge the presence of the former Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. Is there any way the Estimates for Vote 28 can include the promotion of cultural product in all of its manifestations? We have seen the devastation of the domestic budget for culture. We should remember that Irish culture has become an international commodity and it is something for which we are well renowned. It can self-evidently be part and parcel with this Vote in so far as there is room for the promotion of cultural trade on a profitable basis as well as on an influential diplomatic basis. I await a response.

Deputy Eric Byrne: All of my contributions today will be conscious of the fact that Ireland now has a multicultural and diverse society. When I looked at programme A, I noted certain things in particular such as cultural relations with other countries. The Chinese community has done a great job in terms of PR because we will have a Chinese festival to celebrate the Year of the Goat in the next week or so. Many of the questions I would like to ask are probably ir-

relevant and perhaps the Minister will shut me up in due course.

Vice Chairman: The Minister would never do so.

Deputy Terence Flanagan: That is a matter for the Chair.

Vice Chairman: I will not interrupt Deputy Eric Byrne as long as he sticks to discussing programme A.

Deputy Eric Byrne: Does the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade look exclusively at events that happen outside of the country, thus bypassing the intercultural and interfaith diversity that exists in this country? The Department of Justice and Equality is supposed to fund integration policy but it has no money in the kitty. What is meant by A4, cultural relations with other countries? Can we develop greater cultural links with the diverse communities that already exist here? They are highly organised. Is there funding available to create relationships with such communities?

I note that the contribution to national and international organisations unfortunately centres around four bullet points. Does that fund contribute to interfaith organisations, intercultural organisations or even the work done by the office of integration in Dublin City Council which has done a great deal of incredible work? I am quite sure my queries are outside the remit of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade but I would still like a response.

Vice Chairman: That concludes questions on programme A and I call on the Minister to reply.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I thank Deputies for their positive remarks in respect of the St. Patrick's Day activities. It is very important that the very best opportunity be taken over that period by a range of Ministers. I cannot conceive of a similar type of opportunity available in any other country in the world. St. Patrick's Day is a huge international celebration and is an annual event. In recent times we have successfully turned it into an opportunity to showcase all that is best about Ireland.

Members will be aware that the day has long since gone when Ministers would avail of the opportunity merely to review a parade in a city that had a large Irish community. We now have assurances, on the part of a wide range of Departments, that their Minister will engage in opportunities from the trade, economic and cultural point of view. The one assurance I can give the committee is that each and every Minister and Minister of State who travels abroad will use the festival to the maximum. We will ensure that we have new markets, that we maintain existing markets, and that it is a festival that showcases everything good and positive about Ireland and what it means to be Irish.

Deputy Smith referred to trade agreements. He will be aware that the lead role in respect of trade agreement is taken at European Commission level. The lead role in government is taken by my colleague, the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Richard Bruton, but members can rest assured that my Department works very closely with that Department. The human rights considerations raised by Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan and others in the past are very much to the fore in discussions with the Commission and Ireland takes a very strong and active stance in this regard. I will continue to keep the committee fully apprised of our engagement in that regard, but members will be aware that the lead role is taken by the Minister, Deputy Richard Bruton, and the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation.

Deputy Brendan Smith mentioned Atlantic corridor. Members will be aware that the Department has been funding this initiative since it was established 13 years ago. Last year €175,000 was given to the organisation and we believe the initiative is worthy of review at this stage. The organisation does good work on a range of issues; however, it is fair to accept that the funding of organisations such as Atlantic corridor by the Department is something of an anomaly. If Atlantic corridor is to remain in existence, it may well seek other forms of funding for its activities. It is doing this with an element of success, but I intend to review its operation this year.

Deputy Seán Crowe mentioned human rights, an issue that comes up regularly at the committee. I assure members that the promotion and protection of human rights throughout the world remain a priority for the Government. Our primary but not exclusive focus is on using the established international human rights machinery to monitor implementation of universal human rights standards. We avail of every opportunity to raise the issue of human rights at the relevant fora we attend, including the UN Human Rights Council, the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Members will be aware that we currently hold a seat on the UN Human Rights Council for the period 2013 to 2015. We will continue to maintain a lead role in that regard.

A specific point was raised by Deputy Ruairí Quinn about the promotion of cultural activities. Our embassies continue to work very closely with Culture Ireland. We gave the issue prominence at the recent conference in Dublin Castle and will continue to do so in so far as we can because the budget in this regard is small and will remain so in 2015. Deputy Eric Byrne raised the issue of diversity. We wish to remain open to the promotion of culture in all its forms. We will continue to promote Ireland as an open and diverse society at every opportunity.

Deputy Pat Breen took the Chair.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: On the question of trade missions, has the Minister identified certain areas?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: In the context of our economic recovery, we have highlighted areas where we can increase our level of trade, particularly in the export market sector. There has been a particular concentration on trade promotion in the Asian market in recent times. The economic importance of Asia, coupled with its role as a engine for innovation and good practice, has led to a situation where our missions there have been most successful. A successful mission in recent times has resulted in our opening new permanent missions in Asia, including in 2014 Jakarta, Indonesia and Hong Kong. We continue to look at markets in which we have opportunities to engage in further trade. In addition to identifying an Asia strategy, covering China, India, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, we are looking at a trade strategy for Vietnam and Thailand. We now have a full-time mission in Bangkok. The review undertaken recently identified high potential markets not only in Asia but also across Africa and Latin America. Countries such as Turkey, Indonesia, Nigeria, Mexico and Chile were identified. We continue to maintain active engagement to explore further opportunities. We have a trade mission planned for this year which will involve visiting the high potential markets we have identified.

Chairman: I hope to propose at our meeting next week to consider our work programme that the committee, with its approval, prepare a report on an Asia strategy. We hope the Department will of some assistance to us in that regard. Asia and the ASEAN countries have much to offer, particularly given the huge volume of exports to China and concentration of trade in that region. There are, however, other markets in the region, as the Minister remarked, on which we

should be concentrating.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I asked about Cuba. Are there plans to undertake a trade mission there in the future?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I do not believe we have plans to visit Cuba in the immediate future. Both my Department and I would welcome an opportunity to hear from the committee if there are areas in which its members believe we can forge new exploratory links. We would be happy to hear from them in the form of a report at any stage.

Deputy Eric Byrne: To follow through on the point raised, Cuba is opening up and now would be a good time for our officials to start engaging with it, given that President Obama is opening up relations with it at a rapid pace? I want to go there on my holidays next Christmas, but I am concerned that the Yanks may have booked all of the accommodation available and smoked all of the cigars. On foot of the question asked, will the Minister's officials be proactive in exploring Cuba as a developing market?

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: On the banking issue, bank accounts in Ireland that included the word "Cuba" were closed. The committee followed up on that issue on which there was further correspondence with the Minister for Finance and the Central Bank. It is bizarre that Irish banks are not allowed to hold accounts for Irish citizens with connections with Cuba. If we are seeking to open up links with Cuba, as I hope we will, this issue must be addressed and resolved.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: Our embassy in Mexico has jurisdiction over our engagement with Cuba. Our relations are excellent. If Deputy Eric Byrne has contacts in Cuba, we would be very happy to hear any proposal he might have as to how we might engage further with that country to provide an opportunity that was not readily identifiable in the past.

Chairman: I call Deputy Ruairí Quinn.

Deputy Eric Byrne: The Minister can recognise the potential for increased tourism, a field in which we are excellent.

Chairman: We can only have one speaker at a time.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: I wish to follow up on the point raised.

Deputy O'Sullivan's interest in Cuba dates back a long time, as does mine. There is in Ireland a Cuba solidarity group. The Minister could perhaps start by inviting its representatives to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to explore possible and existing connections.

Deputy Eric Byrne: We are very good at creating links with Africa. Reference was made to Vietnam and such countries. We can see the economic trend and turnaround taking place in Cuba. We are very good at agriculture and have an excellent basis on which to work with Cuba through the Irish tourism board. Cuban tourism is going to boom out of all proportion. We might consider direct air links, perhaps via Shannon or Dublin, to Cuba. Perhaps we could talk to Cuban airlines and develop the relationship. Now is the time, before the Americans run away with all the business contacts. They will inevitably exploit the opportunities.

Chairman: On a point of interest, this committee has received an invitation from the Parliament in Cuba to visit that country at some stage in 2015. This will be discussed under correspondence at next week's meeting. Members can decide on that. Perhaps the departmental

officials might note that also.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I will be very happy to hear from members on their return by way of report.

Chairman: We have not gone yet, and there is no guarantee we will be going.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: Members will appreciate that there are obviously great opportunities, but we must work within our resources. We have a mere three embassies covering all of South America and Central America. That presents difficulties and means that we cannot engage in the manner members would like. I certainly take on board the recommendation of the committee that we engage actively with Cuba and other countries. We will do so.

Members will be aware that my officials have raised the Cuban banking issue. We continue to pursue the matter actively and we will keep Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan and others informed in so far as we can.

Chairman: I acknowledge that the Cuban ambassador is present at this meeting.

We will move on to programme B, which concerns consular, passport and Irish abroad services. Obviously, this is an important area. I commend the work done by our consular service abroad. We have seen it in operation at first hand. Since I became Chairman, I have noted the efficiency in the Passport Office and how it can process passports so quickly. We visited the passport centre in Balbriggan. Circumstances have changed so much in recent times. I acknowledge the dedicated work of the staff in the Passport Office.

Regarding the Irish abroad services, we now have our first Minister of State responsible for the diaspora, Deputy Jimmy Deenihan. He is actually present today and not meeting the diaspora abroad. He is very welcome.

Deputy Brendan Smith: With regard to passports, we appreciate the help we get from both the Minister's office and the Passport Office when we have individual queries from constituents. I would like the cost of an emergency passport to be reconsidered. We have all heard of people who have to travel abroad because of a death in the family or an injury, or to pursue a job opportunity. The charge for an emergency passport is prohibitive. It should be reviewed and lowered substantially for people who have tight household budgets. Nobody is looking for an emergency passport for the fun of it; the individual needs it. I would like this matter to be revisited.

With regard to support for Irish emigrant services, I welcome the comments of the Minister of State, Deputy Deenihan, on the programme and its value and importance over the years to so many communities throughout Britain, the United States and farther afield.

Just before Christmas, we discussed the proposal by RTE to cease the longwave radio service to Britain. I am thankful there was a reprieve, and the service is to continue for a considerable period. I acknowledge that the Minister of State, Deputy Deenihan, and the Minister, Deputy Charles Flanagan, have pursued this matter, and I appreciate that. It was suggested that the shortfall in funding could be addressed by taking funds from those allocated for the emigrant support programme. I would not support that proposal. I want the longwave radio service continued, but RTE should fund it. The money should not be taken from a budget that is put to very good use by emigrant groups throughout the world. I hope the Minister will ensure that RTE continues to provide the longwave radio service, but not at the expense of the Depart-

ment or through reducing the much-needed supports that certain emigrant groups are receiving. It is an issue for many communities in the Six Counties, including in the glens of Antrim and Armagh, and throughout Britain also. I appreciate what has happened. I would like a close eye kept on this issue to ensure the service will not cease.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I congratulate the Minister on his performance in this area and on the launch of the new passport card, which will become very popular. It is a handy device to gain quick access to Europe and, to some extent, other places worldwide. It represents a huge leap forward in terms of the utilisation of modern technology in a modern fashion to meet modern needs.

With regard to distressed Irish abroad, to what extent are embassies called upon to deal with such circumstances? I refer to a certain Irish citizen abroad who has been in a very distressed state for several months. Would the Minister like to comment on that?

Deputy Brendan Smith commented on longwave radio, and I agree with him entirely. The longwave radio station is a lifeline for many Irish people who have been living abroad for years. I refer not so much to those who have emigrated in recent years but to those who emigrated in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. The radio station is their only means of daily contact with their homeland. Without incurring expenditure, we should try to ensure the service is retained. Our national broadcaster should be capable and ready to deal with that issue.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I notice there is an increase in pay of €4.7 million and an increase in non-pay costs of €4 million. This falls under the category of administration. Perhaps the Minister will expand on that.

Like other members, I welcome the new passport card. How much will it cost and when will people be able to receive it? What is the thinking behind the card? What is the difference between the passport card and a regular passport? It would be useful if people listening today got a sense of what the card might be used for.

Are there are plans to open new embassies in 2015? Returning from a trip to Iran, we were under the impression that if an embassy were to be opened, the Department would look favourably on the embassy we used to have there. Is any decision being made on that embassy? To where will services be expanded?

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: Is the funding of community organisations centrally organised or allocated, or is it at the discretion of our embassies where we have significant Irish communities? At what stage is the diaspora policy? With regard to the ongoing work concerning people who have been in institutions in this country, including Magdalen laundries, can Irish men and women living abroad be included in the diaspora policy so that their birthright will be recognised?

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: I have two questions on subhead B. Would it be possible at some stage to communicate to Members of both Houses the comparative costs of passports in other European countries, specifically the 28 EU countries? Is the figure an arbitrary one that cannot be compared? There is no Aldi or Lidl version, so we do not know whether our passport fee is good value for money.

I record my appreciation of the fantastic service provided by Irish consulates and embassies. Irish people get themselves into crazy and, in some cases, very difficult situations by forgetting basic items of equipment. They would not forget these items if they were going to Croke Park

or Lansdowne Road, yet they seem to expect to be able to fly to the far end of the world and assume things will be the same as they are at home. This is not the glamour end of the foreign service, but from a human point of view and in terms of contact with Irish citizens, it is crucially important. I wish for my appreciation to be conveyed to the staff involved.

Deputy Eric Byrne: While we are praising ourselves for all of the excellent work we are doing, there seems, tragically, to be an increase in the number of Irish people who are giving Ireland a bad name. I have read reports on the need to deport Irish people from Australia. Has the consular service noticed such a trend? What are the Irish doing to give us such a bad name?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: The Minister of State, Deputy Jimmy Deenihan, will speak about emigrant support services and the Diaspora.

Deputy Brendan Smith spoke about the cost of an emergency passport and the consequent hardship which he considered was placed on those making an application. There is no charge for an emergency passport over and above the normal cost of a passport. I accept what Deputy Ruairí Quinn said and I am happy to carry out a comparative analysis across a range of countries of the cost of a passport. Members will be aware of great improvements consequent on changes made in the Passport Office. In 2014 the Department issued 629,000 passports, generating €37 million in revenue. Everyone will agree that the passport service strives at all times to provide a fast, secure and affordable service. I acknowledge, in particular, the contribution in recent years of Mr. Joe Nugent who has now left the Passport Office. He presided over an office which provided a very fine service for citizens and the changes are ongoing.

Deputies Bernard J. Durkan and Eric Byrne mentioned the passport card. I have an example with me. It is similar in size to a credit card and fits easily into a wallet or purse. It contains the precise, detailed information contained in the passport booklet and is very secure. It will not, however, contain a visa for travel to countries where visas are required. It will be introduced in July and available to adult holders of an Irish passport. It will be accepted for travel throughout the European Union and the EEA travel area. I have no doubt that there will be a big demand for it, particularly among young adults. It represents a very positive and new departure.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: How much will it cost?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: It will cost €35. We are actively engaged with other jurisdictions to ensure its increased acceptance across Europe and beyond.

The passport service continually looks towards reform, embraces new technologies and offers a service to the public in a way which ensures efficiency. This year we intend to issue a number of contracts. They will include contracts for facial recognition software, in an attempt to combat fraud, and new mailing machines to improve efficiency of service. We will also look to improve our processes for sharing information with other Departments in a safe and secure way.

I acknowledge the words of Deputies Bernard J. Durkan and Ruairí Quinn about the consular service. In response to Deputy Eric Byrne's question, this is an area which presents a great challenge to those involved in the provision of a high quality consular assistance service for Irish citizens at home and abroad, which they do to very good effect. In 2014 the service assisted over 1,670 Irish citizens in cases of emergency, including deaths, illness, involvement with the criminal law, accidents, hospitalisations and abductions. There was an increase in demand in the order of 3% on the figure for 2013. With the opening of new missions, we expect

to deal with a greater number of citizens requiring aid, assistance, support and help in 2015. On behalf of those involved in the unit, I accept what has been said about the assistance provided and the manner in which cases are dealt with. I do not see a particular problem arising in any country. However, it is fair to say a trend is to be seen in jurisdictions and countries which have seen an influx of Irish immigrants. The more people who are working and living somewhere, the more likely it is that there will be a consequent requirement for consular services.

As well as offering aid and assistance, the Department, through its consular services, has registered more than 5,500 people for Irish citizenship under the foreign births registration system. We will continue, in spite of challenging budgets, to ensure Irish citizens abroad will continue to enjoy the level of service to which they have become accustomed through consular services.

I am happy to engage further with Deputy Ruairí Quinn and other members on passport comparison costs. However, the cost of an Irish passport is not high by international comparison. It appears that we come in at the lower end of the spectrum. I am happy to provide the detailed figures, although I do not have them to hand.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Will the Minister address the case of an Irish citizen in prison in Egypt?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: The specific case to which the Deputy refers is that of Ibrahim Halawa, on which we have been engaged in some detail for many months. It exemplifies the high level of attention and engagement that is often required of the consular services. My Department and I are monitoring the case very closely. Last week I again raised the issue with Ms Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who has undertaken to raise it with the relevant authorities. There have been very few cases, over a long period of time, that have seen such a level of engagement by our team of officials in Cairo. I continue to raise my concerns directly with the Egyptian authorities and have met the Minister on at least three occasions. I was somewhat disappointed to learn that the case was adjourned at a recent hearing. Deputy Durkan and others are very much aware of the concerns in this case, which I hope will be resolved at an early date in a manner that can be regarded as satisfactory and allows the individual concerned to return home.

Chairman: I compliment ambassador Moylan and her team on the consular services they have provided in Egypt. They have done a great job and I know they keep in constant touch with the individual in question.

Deputy Eric Byrne: I agree with the Chairman's comment on the role of the ambassador.

To return to the 26 Irish persons being deported from Australia, does the consular service invariably get involved when a government is deporting Irish people? If people are being deported to Ireland from another jurisdiction in which a criminal case has been taken against them, is the Department of Justice and Equality notified? What is the procedure when people are being deported for reasons that include involvement in criminal activities? In Australia, for example, widespread exploitation of innocent people has occurred.

Chairman: Does the Minister wish to comment?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: Contact will be made in all cases involving an Irish citizen in another jurisdiction where assistance is sought. The Department will make efforts to ensure a satisfactory outcome is achieved. We are very much aware of the case involving 26 Irish citi-

zens in Australia whom I understand will be the subject of a deportation order by the Australian authorities. We have not received any particular request to provide consular assistance. As Deputy Byrne will be aware, the issuing and revoking of visas and deportation orders in Australia are matters for the authorities there. We are aware of the case the Deputy raises.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I understand an additional charge is applied where people seek to have a passport issued in a short timeframe. While the position may have changed, people were charged an additional fee previously for having a passport issued within a certain number of days. The classification of “emergency passport” appears to be wrong. What does the term mean?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: An additional charge applies if a passport is sought and received within a short period, that is, faster than the five-day turnaround period.

Deputy Brendan Smith: The charge is substantial. I am aware of a number of cases involving people who had to travel abroad not on holiday but to attend to business or family matters such as a bereavement. In counties such as my home county of Cavan, which has a history of emigration, many people are affected by deaths and bereavements of loved ones in Britain. Many elderly people do not have a passport and when a bereavement occurs abroad and an elderly person applies for a passport, he or she will not have evidence of travel arrangements because it is not possible to book a flight until details of the funeral arrangements become available. Families have been put through the wringer and required to provide a letter from a hospital or undertaker stating that a person is deceased. The facts, as presented, should be taken at face value. It would be helpful to have this issue ironed out.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: The point at issue is defining what constitutes an emergency. In the event of there being a bereavement or death abroad, an extra charge does not apply to the procurement of a passport. The only additional charge arises in cases where non-emergency applications for a passport are made seeking a quick turnaround. Where a person in a non-emergency case requires a passport to issue in a time of less than five days, a charge of €55 applies. The charge does not apply in the case of a bereavement or death abroad.

Chairman: Before I invite the Minister of State, Deputy Jimmy Deenihan, to make his opening statement, I will pose a number of questions which I ask him to bear in mind. First, when may we expect to receive the review on the diaspora? The Minister of State has promised to appear before the joint committee on the day of the report’s launch. Second, does he intend to hold a global economic forum towards the end of the year? These forums have been highly successful in the past.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Jimmy Deenihan): I thank the Chairman and members for attending. As they will be aware, the position of Minister of State with special responsibility for the diaspora is a new, challenging and exciting role, which has been well received all over the world. Everyone I have met on all levels during my visits to Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States has been very positive about it. Those working in the various centres I visited, people on Capitol Hill and Washington, including the Friends of Ireland group and various other Representatives with Irish DNA are all very excited about the post. I believe it will be an important role in the future and will connect Ireland and the broader diaspora.

I am delighted to be the first Minister of State with special responsibility for the diaspora. It is very important that future Governments retain the position. I intend to lay foundations for

it through the diaspora strategy about which the Chairman and Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan asked. The strategy will go to Cabinet next Tuesday week and I will publish it immediately thereafter. I will be pleased to appear before the joint committee to discuss its various provisions. While it does not provide for a single major new initiative, it contains many smaller initiatives. I am convinced that, if implemented, it will make a major difference. I have included in the report a clause providing for a review of the strategy after two years. If members have any proposals to add to the strategy, we will try to implement them.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan also asked about the emigrant support programme. I was not familiar with the programme before my appointment. The Irish abroad unit, which was established in the Department in 2004, has proved to be very successful. It administers the emigrant support programme centrally, with a specific individual having responsibility for each of the major countries. This approach works well because the individuals in question have continuous and direct contact with the various emigrant centres. This is a very good way to administer funds. An audit programme of the various recipients of funding is under way. For example, audits are taking place in the United States this year and a number were completed in the United Kingdom last year. This is important from the point of view of validation.

Contact between the Irish abroad unit and all the emigrant centres is ongoing. This year, for example, funding has been maintained at €11.6 million and I will receive an additional €1 million from the Department of the Taoiseach, which also has a role in this area. Total funding will be €12.6 million.

It is extraordinary that Ireland is the only country in the world that does this type of work. Other countries use our services. We should recognise the role played by previous Ministers and officials in the Department in this area. We are unique in this area. Other countries are examining the way in which the private and public sectors are working together on this very successful initiative.

Reference was made to RTE's long wave 252 service, which is very important to Irish emigrants in the United Kingdom, especially the elderly. As a result of excellent lobbying at home but especially abroad, the service will continue until 2017. At the time, I noted the absence of research to determine exactly how many people listen to RTE's long wave service. We are now in negotiations with RTE on this matter.

Deputy Brendan Smith referred to the funding required for the transmission of RTE's long-wave service. The Department will fund research to determine the number of people using the service and ensure we have a proper database. Going back to what Deputy Smith said about funding transmission, we are going to fund research to determine the number of people using it in order that we have a proper database to determine its importance and, hopefully, decide on its continuity. The research into listenership will take place shortly.

Deputy Quinn mentioned St. Patrick's Day and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade mentioned that it is a major opportunity for our country. No other country, apart from Ireland, gets access to the White House on its national day. No other country gets the type of coverage we get all over the world. When I was in my previous Department, I assembled a group looking to internationalise St. Patrick's Day. There was a proposal to have two culture nights. Culture night works very well and having a second one would only dilute the effect of culture night as we are used to it. In its place, I suggested an initiative to internationalise St. Patrick's Day and to brand it as an international day for Irish culture. We are working on the process and it is referred to as the diaspora strategy. No country has this opportunity and so many iconic buildings

all over the world have been greened. It resonates with people all over the world.

Deputy Eric Byrne referred to brand Ireland. The people I have met all over the world are very conscious of their image and the fact that they are ambassadors for Ireland. It is important that isolated incidents, such as those in Australia, do not recur. The local population in San Francisco, which I will be visiting shortly, was embarrassed and annoyed about what happened last year with some J1 students. The message is that everyone, including students leaving the country, is an Irish ambassador promoting brand Ireland and it is very important people behave responsibly. They should always keep that at the back of their minds when they are representing Ireland. Many of them meet more people than our diplomatic corps so they are important ambassadors for our country. I am glad the matter was raised because we should be very aware of it.

Chairman: Are there plans for a global economic forum?

Deputy Jimmy Deenihan: The global economic forum will take place next November and plans are being put in place. The global economic forum has been very successful since it was initiated in 2010. We have had three and the feedback from around the world has been positive. Other countries are looking at the model to bring back their top business connections around the world from the diaspora. Some of the investment coming to Ireland are coming through contacts made at the global economic forum. It will happen towards the end of the year.

Chairman: Programme C concerns reconciliation and co-operation on this island. We must congratulate the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, assisted by the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, on the marvellous work done in getting together both groups in Northern Ireland. An agreement was drawn up before Christmas.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: The amount allocated for the programme for 2015 is €20 million, an increase of €2.5 million on the provision for 2014. The maintenance of peace, stability and economic growth in Northern Ireland remains a priority of the Government. The focus for 2015 will be on the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement. A review meeting has been convened by the UK and Irish Governments and it will be held on a quarterly basis. Six monthly updates on the progress of implementation will be published and, together with the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, I am looking forward to attending the first of these implementation meetings which takes place in Belfast on Friday. Implementation of the agreement is likely to be as challenging as the negotiation was in the final quarter of last year.

With regard to reconciliation funds, the fund strengthens the foundations of the peace process through increased understanding and reconciliation across the island. The allocation for 2015 is €2.7 million, the same as in 2014. Last year, there were a total of 320 applications for funding. The allocation was fully disbursed and 99% of grants were awarded to 160 projects. The objectives of the International Fund for Ireland, established in 1986 by the Irish and British Governments, are in line with the high-level goals of the Department to strengthen co-operation North and South and to work on a matter of lasting reconciliation. As part of the Stormont House Agreement, the Government reallocated savings of €5 million within the existing budget allocation for international bodies, Vote 28, to the International Fund for Ireland to support its work on the programme of reconciliation in Northern Ireland and in the Border counties. In addition, the Department will continue to support the administration of the International Fund for Ireland with an allocation for 2015 of €150,000, the same level as last year. I thank the Chairman and members for their comments. We had a recent Dáil debate on this but if there are any questions on any aspects of funding, I will be happy to deal with them.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I welcome the fact that the Government is now giving €5 million to the board of the International Fund for Ireland to move its strategy forward. One of the major concerns in recent years has been the increase in sectarianism. Much of the funding goes to those interface areas and cross-party and cross-community work that is so important. With regard to shared spaces where it is safe for people to talk, I commend the Department on the work it is carrying out. I am a member of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and we have done a lot of outreach work to Unionist, and republican and Nationalist areas. However, there is no real structured element in regard to the House. I feel a bit awkward that we deal with the North in the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade. There should be structures. There is no structured group in the House meeting many of the communities we are funding. Does the Minister have a view on that? I am not taking away from the good work of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, which is of huge significance. There is room for another structure. Does the Minister have a view on that?

Deputy Brendan Smith: I had the opportunity to speak on this in the Dáil last week and I compliment the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, on helping to bring about the Stormont House Agreement.

The Community Relations Council made a presentation to the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and outlined its concerns about funding for different organisations and community groups. There is a lack of stability in knowing when it will have funding to continue certain programmes. The group appreciates the support it has received from the Irish Government but the lack of decision-making at the level of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister has provided some instability in regard to those groups continuing their very important work. We had the opportunity to see, in loyalist areas in east Belfast and elsewhere, good facilities that were put in place through substantial financial support from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. A continuation of that is essential because there are many communities who are disaffected and who believe they have not been beneficiaries of the Good Friday Agreement, the St. Andrews Agreement and the progress that has been made on this island.

Am I correct in my interpretation that following the agreement reached at Stormont Castle, the Department paid €5 million to the International Fund for Ireland at the end of 2014? I presume that money is for work that will be undertaken this year. Some of the officials who are with the Minister would be very familiar with the workings of the International Fund for Ireland in the early 1990s. At that time it was very focused on providing facilities and supporting communities in the six Northern and six Southern Border counties to develop small enterprise units and so forth. The emphasis of the fund has now moved to people programmes. The programmes being introduced by the fund now, supported by the Irish and British Governments and other donors, have moved away from supporting communities and towards the development of facilities.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: Has any cost-benefit analysis been undertaken by the Department in the context of the amount of money that is going into North-South development co-operation? On programme C, a significant amount of money, amounting to almost €14.5 million, is for salaries and related administrative costs. How many people are involved, approximately, and what percentage of the total number of people at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade are involved in this activity?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: On the matter of reconciliation, the whole objective and aim

of the funding is to foster a spirit of reconciliation in areas where that has not been possible over the years. Since the fund was first established back in 1982, over €44 million has been disbursed to approximately 2,000 projects. It is important to stress that the International Fund for Ireland is focused on reconciliation rather than bricks and mortar. The emphasis is on community relationships rather than community buildings. That is very much evidenced by the improved climate in areas of polarisation in Belfast in particular but also throughout Northern Ireland. I had the opportunity to visit a cross-community project in west Belfast a number of weeks ago. I saw at first hand the type of work that is undertaken and the value for money therefrom. Similarly, before the agreement was reached, I had the opportunity to visit a number of projects in east Belfast. The level of funding to the reconciliation fund, at €2.7 million for this year and last year, is in line with the letter of the Good Friday Agreement. We cannot take for granted the huge amount of progress that has been made since the Good Friday Agreement, but obviously there is still important work to be done on the matter of reconciliation. In that regard, as well as politicians and church leaders providing a lead role, there is also a really important role for civil society in shaping a more cohesive society in Northern Ireland.

It is important to note that there are two funding rounds annually. The closing date for the current round is 6 March 2015. I often meet groups who would like to apply for funding but who do not have the information required to do so. In that context, I repeat that the closing date for applications for the current round of funding is 6 March. I would also like to make reference to the EU INTERREG IV programme, which should come on stream by mid-2015. That will comprise a sum of €300 million, which will ensure that many projects and programmes will be funded and will be in a position to make progress.

In response to Deputy Quinn's question about value for money, there is an ongoing process of ensuring accountability through auditing and making sure that moneys are being spent in a way that will bring communities together and that will involve the type of interaction that has proved impossible in the past. We are satisfied, on the basis of the funding, that the programmes are inclusive and that progress is being made over a wide range of issues. Often progress does not happen at the speed we would wish for, and some programmes do not produce the overnight dividends that are seen with certain other projects, but undoubtedly the funding that we provide plays a very important role in shaping a more reconciled society.

Chairman: Thank you, Minister. We will now move on to programme D, which is international peace, security and human rights.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: My Department's commitment to international peace, security and human rights is channelled through programme D, which has a total allocation of just over €69 million. This compares to a provision outturn of €63 million in 2014. Most of the expenditure under this programme relates to Ireland's mandatory contributions to international organisations of which we are a member, including the United Nations, where the significant outturn relates to contributions to and support for peacekeeping operations. As I mentioned earlier, making a prediction on the matter of payments for this programme, particularly with regard to UN peacekeeping operations, can be difficult. Estimated costs are submitted, in some cases, 12 months in advance of when the payments might be finalised. Oftentimes, new missions might arise in response to an emerging crisis, and, of course, there is also the uncertainty with regard to currency fluctuations and exchange rates. All of the aforementioned factors can have an impact on the final outturn that will be due in any given year.

A key pillar of our international engagement under programme D is our input into shaping the formulation of the European Union's common foreign, defence and security policy, most

notably at the monthly meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, in which I participate. As I mentioned earlier, there will be a special meeting of the council tomorrow.

We will continue to advance our human rights priorities through our membership of the UN Human Rights Council in 2015, our final year on the council. Last year we had a highly visible and active second year on the council, during which we saw the adoption of two important resolutions. Ireland will undergo its third periodic examination before the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in June of this year. We are co-ordinating Ireland's response to the list of issues requested by the CESCR. We continue to make a positive and active contribution to the work of our multilateral partners in targeted policy areas, including peace-keeping, conflict resolution, conflict prevention, international development and disarmament, and on UN Security Council Resolution No. 1325 on women, peace and security.

In 2015, disarmament and non-proliferation will remain a priority. This will include participation in the review conference of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty; continuing engagement with the International Atomic Energy Agency, including through membership of the board of governors; participation in the Nuclear Suppliers Group and other counter-proliferation bodies supporting the effective implementation of the arms trade treaty; and making a contribution to the first review conference on the Convention on Cluster Munitions.

We will also be engaging with the developing international discussion on lethal autonomous weapons systems and the preparation for next year's review conference on the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention. That will also be a focus for us in the current year. We take our obligations and contributions seriously.

I acknowledge the contribution, advice, guidance and participation of the Chairman in many of these endeavours and the contribution of his committee members from time to time.

Deputy Eric Byrne: I applaud the work of the Department. This section does Ireland proud. It is unbelievable. I want to praise the Minister and his officials. For a tiny country, the contributions we are making in the international arena through volunteers and the security forces, whether military or police, are held in the highest of esteem. It was painful for me yesterday to listen to 19 Deputies vote against the association agreement with Malta, Georgia and Ukraine, especially in light of the work Irish people are putting into the Ukrainian crisis through the OSCE. I am familiar with Donetsk and Luhansk. An Irish man, who shall be unnamed, is heading up a sub-team of the OSCE special monitoring mission in that area. There are Irish people at the coalface of post-war situations, war prevention, and actual war, trying to keep the peace. It is impossible to praise them sufficiently. I found it painful and insulting for the ambassador sitting in the Visitors Gallery yesterday to hear this. One of the ambassadors said to me, "You know how painful it was to listen to those people? I have had to live 25 years under communism and it is painful to listen to them tell me what society I have to live under when we have the freedom of choice in this day and age." I want to praise the Department extensively. This is where we shine at the level of the United Nations, the OSCE and all of these levels. I can say that because I know of the feedback from people from Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina or Moldova who will say, "Ah, you're Irish. We had a policeman". Take a bow. It is an excellent programme.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I want to acknowledge the role of so many Irish people over the years and currently in peacekeeping missions in very dangerous situations. They do us proud. While Ireland is a member of the UN Human Rights Council, it is important that we highlight as strongly, vigorously and consistently as possible the issues of the persecution of minorities

and of Christians and the violence worldwide against women. These are important issues that we must keep at the top of the agenda.

We know how dated the architecture of the United Nations is. Are we putting forward any proposals on a review of the structures of the UN, the composition of the Security Council and the fact that it does not replicate the modern political situation that has evolved over many decades since it was established?

The briefing note we were given states that Ireland's second national action plan on women, peace and security will be finalised. Is there a timeframe for that? What is the remit of that policy?

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: I want to be associated with the remarks of my colleague, Deputy Eric Byrne, on the overall work that is being done through successive Administrations by foreign affairs officials, people on the ground and the wider Irish network of people involved. We all know its history, but it must be constantly restated.

The one area of vulnerability is the contributions to international organisations, D3. Just under €15 billion is an awful lot of money in any domestic Department. The political support we have so far succeeded in maintaining for that spend in times of cutbacks across the domestic programmes will not survive if we continue to allow corruption, manifest or not so manifest, as in Uganda and other situations. We are giving €4.6 million, a substantial sum of money, to the Palestinian Authority, which is notorious for its level of corruption. That money comes mostly from Arab donors, for whom it is only a few barrels of oil. I would like to hear what kind of sanctions the Minister has exercised. I am familiar with what happened when money went missing in Uganda. Has there been any follow-up on that? Can we have a forensic scrutiny of that spend?

It is not money that we have. It is money that we are borrowing and that our children and our children's children may have to repay. This is not cash that we are giving out through the generosity of our heart. We do not have it, we are borrowing it, and we are preventing other areas from getting the same amount of money. It is something I feel very strongly about, in addition to the positive comments of Deputies Smith and Eric Byrne.

Deputy Seán Crowe: When does the Government plan to finalise and release Ireland's national plan on business and human rights? The Minister mentioned the unpredictability of demands in relation to the UN, but have there been any demands in relation to Irish peacekeepers abroad in 2015? Has there been any increase? There is a €5.6 million decrease in D.3, contribution to international organisations. It seems a significant amount to look at the budget. Is there any background to that?

There has been mention of the Palestinian Authority. Money has been set aside for Gaza. I recently met people just back from there. The place has been flattened. There is very little activity going on there. It is difficult for politicians to get in - one cannot get in through Egypt or through the Israeli checkpoints. They are saying that there are issues with clean water, the price of gas, petrol, diesel, and electricity. The place is just levelled. They say they have never seen such frustration within the local population. We have allocated funding for that particular area, but is there any idea where and when it will be spent and on what projects? I presume one of the projects would relate to wells for water. The people I was talking to said that when one has a shower it is salt water, but there is also a smell of sewage from it because they are pumping it directly from the sea. I would be interested in the Minister's view on that.

There is corruption right across the world. If one looks at this country and the holes in the system politicians are at the top of the list, unfortunately. The fact that we are trying to address many of these issues is the key. The Uganda situation was identified through support that came from Ireland in relation to funding the Department there. There was another incident in another country we support. Again, it was identified that funding that was going missing. It happens across the world. People want to be reassured that we are monitoring and getting the best value for money.

Chairman: Some of the questions are straying into Vote 27, which is international co-operation. Does the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, wish to leave those questions because many of them are Irish Aid questions and are in the Minister of State's area? Does he wish to answer them now? I will bring in the Minister but if the Minister of State wanted to wait-----

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Sean Sherlock): I will take them on the next-----

Chairman: Yes, I will allow some introductory remarks to the Minister of State's before we have questions so we might leave some of those international aid questions to the next session. I ask the Minister to stick with programme D. We will deal with Irish Aid questions under Vote 27.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I acknowledge the comments of Deputies Eric Byrne, Quinn and Smith and everybody on the very positive contribution made by Ireland to international peace, security and human rights. As Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, I find everywhere I go that the contribution over a long number of years and the status of Ireland in this area are widely acknowledged and very much in evidence. It is something of a cliché to say that we punch above our weight but the reality is that we enjoy a very high and widely acknowledged reputation over a range of issues. I acknowledge everybody involved in the team and my predecessors over a number of years.

I will deal briefly with the points at issue. Deputy Crowe mentioned the reduction in funding for international organisations. He is right but this is based on a prudent estimate of the needs this time last year which was not required to be met in the heel of the hunt.

Deputy Smith raised the very important issue of UN Security Council reform. This is a difficult and challenging endeavour. Negotiations on the reform of the UN Security Council and structures have been proceeding for the best part of two decades but, unfortunately, without a notable degree of success to date. There are difficulties in the negotiating process and the bar to reaching agreement on reform of the Security Council is very high. Any amendment to the UN charter would require a two thirds majority, and often times that is very difficult to achieve. We will continue to play our part. Ireland is a member of the recently established accountability, coherence and transparency group at the UN which was launched in New York in May 2013. We will continue to make our contribution to aiming to improve the working methods of the Security Council.

Deputy Crowe mentioned business and human rights. The consultation process is under way and public submissions have been invited. We do not have a strict timeline as yet but I would be most anxious that positive progress would be made this year. The plan will be developed through a process of consultation across a range of Departments and agencies. It is important that we acknowledge the contribution of academics and civil society in general. The human rights unit of the Department is acting as the co-ordinating body and responsibility for

leading the consultation lies with that unit. I am happy to say that there has already been an element of progress. A very successful forum in early November focused solely on the theme of business and human rights. The report of that meeting shows the very positive process in place. I would be happy to keep the committee informed. The forum served as an opportunity for business and civil society to set out their views as we formulate our plan.

Deputy Smith mentioned the very important issue of what Ireland is doing to promote the right to freedom of religion throughout the world. This was a theme of the speech I had the opportunity, indeed the honour, of making to the UN General Assembly in September 2014. The right to freedom of religion and belief remains a priority for Ireland as an active member of the Human Rights Council, and we will continue to have our voice heard in that regard.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: I apologise for coming and going and if the Minister has covered what I am going to raise. In respect of business and human rights, those of us on the committee who have been abroad - I know Iran was mentioned - meet ambassadors and delegations from other countries. There is never an issue with us bringing up human rights issues. There seems to be a reluctance on the part of other Ministries. It is almost a case of believing human rights are to do with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and do not involve any other Minister who is going abroad. We are a voice on human rights and are well respected. The Chairman played his part in getting us a role on the Human Rights Council. Sometimes we are not aware of the extent of the respect felt for us and how much more we could do. One of the points I made about the EU-Colombia agreement was that Irish companies must be to the fore when it comes to labour rights and relations. They could lead by example.

My other point concerns our commitment to overseas development aid. We are at a certain level but have slipped down from what we had agreed. Even though it is almost after the event, this meeting is a very good, open and transparent exercise. I acknowledge the funding of the Irish section of AWEPA in respect of the joint monitoring teams, but this is about encouraging greater engagement with African parliaments on overseas development aid and development issues in order that it is transparent and they have the same opportunity we have here. Would the Minister of State and Irish Aid consider allowing Irish Aid to make presentations at finance committees in our partner countries where a considerable amount of Irish aid goes in order that it is open and transparent and members of parliament and not just the government know where it is going? We have met parliamentarians from African countries who do not know.

Chairman: I will let the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, answer that question when we come to the next section because that relates to Vote 27.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: I apologise as I must leave again.

Chairman: That is fine. I just do not want to bring in Irish Aid at this stage.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I am sorry for having to leave the meeting. I compliment the Minister, his officials, the Ministers of State and all involved in the Stormont House Agreement. It went largely unnoticed at a time of competing issues in the public airways but if it had been unsuccessful, it would not have gone unnoticed. I mark that and compliment all concerned.

The challenges are different with regard to the effectiveness of the UN as a peace enforcer and facilitator. The UN needs to look at how it might have greater impact in the various zones to which it might find itself called in the future. It is a very difficult task. The unfortunate part of the problem is that as long as it appears internationally that the UN is ineffective in dealing

with some of the military challenges coming forward at present, then unfortunately it becomes irrelevant after a certain amount of time.

As others have done I compliment the work on overseas development and the success in that area.

Chairman: We will come to that.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I know we will come to that.

My last point refers to something the Minister said. The issue of the right to practise religion and freedom of speech is topical at present. I offer a personal view. The Constitution provides protection for the practice of all religions and respect for all religions whatever they may be, and respect for each other as well. That is as it should be. In the present turbulent climate a special effort should be made to encourage everybody not to ridicule each other's religion. It is a very personal issue for many people and can be very emotive. It is not necessary to in any way provoke a reaction from quarters where people might be sensitive to that.

I have my religion and I respect other religions, and I know everybody in this Chamber does likewise. I do not see the necessity for or any benefit accruing from the theory that we reserve the right to ridicule each other. A particular war started on the Continent of Africa some years ago as a result of somebody ridiculing somebody else's religion.

Chairman: We may deal with that in our work programme for the coming year. I have ideas about inviting in some of the different Christian groups' and Muslim groups' church leaders. That is something we might deal with in our programme. We can talk about that next week.

I ask the Minister to deal with Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan's first question on human rights and Deputy Durkan's question.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: I apologise to Deputy Crowe because I did not deal with his question on the Palestinian situation, Gaza and our contribution. Members will be aware that at the Gaza reconstruction conference in Cairo in September, Ireland committed a further €25 million towards the reconstruction of Gaza, which is a crisis of enormous dimensions. It is regrettable that progress on that reconstruction since then has been slow - in fact it has been negligible.

This is an issue that has been on the agenda of the Foreign Affairs Council and it will be a matter of priority on the agenda at next month's meeting. I intend visiting the region shortly and I would be happy to report to the committee on that. This is in line with Deputy Quinn's comments about the process of accountability, audit and ensuring that the contributions are directed to the most needy, and that the objective is realised. There is an ongoing process and that is particularly acute in the matter of the Middle East. One of the reasons the Gaza reconstruction programme has not been accelerated in the manner in which some of us might have wished is that the programmes have not been agreed. I am sure everyone would agree it is important to have a clearly defined programme. I hope progress can be made.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: Are any of the northern rich countries making a contribution to that?

Deputy Charles Flanagan: Yes they are. It was remarkable on the occasion of the conference how a wide number of states coming from a particular ideological background were pre-

pared from a humanitarian perspective to make a contribution. Our contribution to that region - our contribution to the Palestinian situation - amounts to in excess of €10 million per annum, which is a substantial sum in the general scheme of things. It underlines our commitment to ensuring that we make our contribution towards a peaceful resolution to what is a very difficult circumstance. I will have the opportunity to attend in coming weeks.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan has raised this issue in parliamentary questions and at this committee. It is a very important issue in terms of business, trade, commerce and human rights. I agree with her that it should not be left exclusively to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. We make submissions to our ministerial colleagues across a range of Departments and we should continue to do so in a way that promotes human rights best practice throughout the world. It should not be the exclusive role of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Our national plan in terms of business and human rights will be important in that regard because we will have an opportunity of drawing from a number of stakeholders throughout society. I believe this committee was represented at the forum. If it was not represented in November, I am sure the forum would be very happy to hear the views of the committee as outlined by Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan and others.

It is important that progress on the plan be formulated and agreed in early course. Trade missions and human rights, as mentioned earlier by Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan, are important. One of the most valuable assets any business, trading company or indeed country has is its reputation. As I have said, we enjoy an enhanced reputation in the area of advancing human rights in jurisdictions where improvements in that area can and should be made.

We know from our own economic experience that we have been working extremely hard to restore our own reputation in the context of our economic crisis. However, we need to pursue actively and in a vigilant manner the human rights concerns we may have. We need to take advantage of the most appropriate opportunities to make our case, in public on occasion and in private on occasion, occasionally through multilateral fora and occasionally on a bilateral level on a case-by-case basis. I believe we do that to very good effect. We discuss human rights on a regular basis with Ministers from other countries, including on trade missions.

As I do not have a copy of the trade mission programme for this year with me, I am not in a position to give it to the Deputy, but I would be happy to do so afterwards. We have our plan formulated for this year and I would be happy to share it with her. If she has any issues she would like raised in the course of those missions, I would be happy to give that consideration.

I will not go into the issues of corruption in Uganda as mentioned by Deputy Quinn. That issue will be covered in some detail by the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, as it is more appropriate to the Vote for which he has responsibility.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I ask the Minister to comment on the UN and the right to practise religion.

Deputy Charles Flanagan: This is an issue we continue to raise. I had the opportunity in September in my first address to the UN General Assembly to make a particular point in condemning all forms of persecution and discrimination based on belief or religion. I specifically highlighted the persecution of Christians and other minorities in the Middle East. As was mentioned to some effect in Poland at a very poignant ceremony at Auschwitz yesterday, I raised concerns in New York in September at the unacceptable rise in anti-Semitic attacks across European countries. We had an attack recently in Paris and an attack in Brussels last year. These

attacks are a source of some concern and should be roundly attacked in every jurisdiction.

Chairman: I thank the Minister. That completes the select committee's consideration of Vote 28. We will now proceed to Vote 27, international co-operation. Before I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, to make his opening remarks, I wish to point out that there are six subheads in Vote 27 and, with the permission of members, we will deal with them all together rather than go through them individually so as to speed up the meeting. Is that agreed? Agreed. Subhead A1 deals with administration - payroll, subhead A2 with administration - non-payroll, subhead A3 with bilateral and other co-operation, subhead A4 with emergency humanitarian assistance, subhead A5 with payments to international funds and subhead A6 with contributions to the UN and other development agencies.

I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, to this, his first meeting with the committee. We hope to have him here by himself in the near future to deal with other Irish Aid issues. We welcome him and wish him well with his portfolio. I now invite him to make his contribution.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I thank the Chairman for his kind remarks. With his permission, I will deal with the questions that were asked before I make my statement, as I am conscious that some people need to move on to deal with other issues.

On the Palestinian question, the Minister mentioned monetary commitments of €10 million, but there is a further funding commitment in 2015 to the bilateral co-operation unit, for which €4.2 million will be provided by Irish Aid. This will support the Palestinian Authority's education development strategic plan and civil society organisations. Effectively, this is about promoting human rights and ensuring funding is focused on educational needs. We are confident that there is no corruption in regard to that fund because, by virtue of the fact that the bilateral arrangement is in place, we have people on the ground in Ramallah and we closely monitor the situation there.

In regard to Uganda, when the issue there arose in 2012 at the office of the Prime Minister, Ireland acted expeditiously to suspend funding of over €16 million in development assistance. We compiled a full report, completed in 2014, through our Department's evaluation and audit unit. We are satisfied that the funds have been recovered and steps have been taken to ensure proper management systems are put in place for the future.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: How come this occurred? Was the money taken fraudulently from the Prime Minister's office?

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Yes - no doubt about it. Since that time, the budget for Uganda has decreased, from €21 million in 2014 to €16.2 million in 2015. An interim programme is in place for Uganda and we are considering developing a new five-year country programme. That process is ongoing as we speak. We are taking a vigilant line in Uganda. A positive result of what happened is that there has been a strengthening of the system for the key partner countries.

On the point made by Deputy O'Sullivan, having visited some of our key partner countries and considering how much funding we divest, I fully agree with her that it would be good to meet more parliamentarians and build links with them at bilateral level, rather than just meeting people at ministerial or presidential level. Through that engagement, we would better see where the rubber hits the road in terms of the impact of the programmes within those key partner countries. I will give some energy to encouraging that. Perhaps we should take up that

theme during future visits to these countries, and I hope to visit some of them in the not too distant future. The Deputy's point is valid.

Chairman: Before the Minister of State continues, I wish to pay tribute to our Irish Aid diplomatic team and to the Irish Aid programme in Uganda. I have seen the programme and NGOs in action at first hand in Karamoja and met the Speaker and foreign Minister there. I believe the Irish Aid programme there has been strengthened, and I commend Irish Aid in regard to the work it has done there on accountability and transparency and on its work to ensure the money is returned to the programme. There is a trial ongoing in regard to the fraud, but our programme is well respected.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Vote 27 - international co-operation - covers the main elements of the Government's international development assistance programme, Irish Aid. The Vote provides the funding necessary to deliver the Department's high-level goals to contribute to the reduction of global poverty and hunger, with a particular focus on sub-Saharan Africa. We can be proud that against a background of great economic and budgetary challenge, the Government has largely managed to protect and stabilise the ODA budget over the past three years. This is recognised as a significant achievement internationally.

This year, the Government has provided slightly in excess of €600 million for official development assistance, a modest increase on the 2014 allocation. Of that total, some €476 million will be administered under Vote 27 and the remaining €125 million is made up of contributions by other Departments and Ireland's share of the EU development co-operation budget. The 2015 ODA allocation represents a significant contribution by Ireland to international development and is a clear demonstration of our commitment to the aid programme.

The Government remains firmly committed to building our aid programme and to the UN target of providing 0.7% of GNP as ODA. However, we can only make progress towards the target when economic circumstances allow. Now that the economy has resumed a path to sustainable growth, I will set out the case for building further on our commitment during 2015. Based on projected GNP figures for 2015, the expected ODA GNP percentage this year is likely to be approximately 0.4%. This will ensure that Ireland remains one of the most significant donors internationally on a *per capita* basis.

On the policy and framework for action, our development co-operation programme, One World One Future, which is guided by our policy on international development, was approved and launched by the Government in 2013. This policy clearly sets out our vision for a sustainable and just world and provides a solid basis for maximising the effectiveness and impact of Ireland's efforts. Recently, we published a framework for action to guide the implementation of our policy, a copy of which I have here. This framework will enable us to strengthen the effectiveness, accountability and impact of our work to measure performance and demonstrate accountability, and is the basis of our detailed operational plans for 2015.

As Deputies are aware, the OECD development assistance committee, DAC, published its positive peer review of Ireland's aid programme last month. The review praises our aid programme, particularly its contribution to tackling hunger and poverty. It highly commends Ireland on having a clear overall vision for development co-operation and on grounding policies in the needs and priorities of our partner countries, noting that partners "value Ireland as an honest broker and a trusted and long-term partner".

The review praised Ireland's commitment to delivering its development programme accord-

ing to international best practices and principles for making aid more effective. In particular, the review noted that Ireland consistently continues to punch above its weight - the committee will forgive me if the cliché is overused today - on humanitarian and resilience issues. We are carefully reviewing the recommendations in the peer review report, which will assist us in continuing to improve the effectiveness of our development during 2015 and beyond.

This year will be a critical year in the fight to end extreme poverty and hunger as we maximise progress under the millennium development goals and negotiate a new framework for international development post-2015. The new framework will mark an important shift to sustainable development with clear and ambitious goals and targets universally applicable to all countries to end extreme poverty, hunger and malnutrition in a single generation. Ireland is actively engaged at the United Nations in negotiating the new sustainable development goals. Recently, the president of the UN General Assembly appointed Ireland and Kenya to co-facilitate the final international negotiations to agree the sustainable development goals at the United Nations over the coming year. Universally, the challenge will be to build consensus among the member states on a broad and comprehensive agenda to be adopted at the major summit of world leaders in New York in September of this year.

Other priority areas for 2015 include reviewing our engagement with the UN and other multilateral organisations to ensure their priorities are aligned with ours, and enhancing our economic links with African countries, particularly our key partner countries. We will also continue to strengthen our systems across the programme to further improve management, accountability and transparency.

Ireland's aid programme has often been praised internationally for its effectiveness, its sharp focus on poverty reduction and its commitment to tackling hunger. Development co-operation is at the heart of our foreign policy. Our key objective for 2015 is to continue to deliver a world-class programme aimed at some of the world's most vulnerable and marginalised people, helping to save lives and build livelihoods. We appreciate the continued strong support and engagement of the committee, and I welcome any questions.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, for his introductory remarks. As he will be aware, we have ongoing engagement on a regular basis with non-governmental organisations. I take the opportunity to compliment them on the excellent work they do, both from an advocacy point of view and through their personnel who are out at the coalface delivering services in difficult situations. I read a commentary recently that stated that quite a number of member countries of the World Health Organization are concerned about the structure and workings of the WHO. This arises particularly in the context of a much too slow and inadequate response to the Ebola outbreak. I presume that Irish Aid is a donor to the World Health Organization. Presumably, the Department of Health is the lead Department. Perhaps the Minister of State would commend on the need to have a much more effective World Health Organization.

I do not support tied aid. However, one question that is continually put to us as public representatives is whether we could source at home more of the products that are needed in countries where we are generous contributors. Some years ago, DIT Kevin Street was doing work on developing food products suitable for the dietary requirements of those in parts of Africa and conflict zones. If we could source more Irish product, it would be a winner in getting across the message about the value of the Irish Aid programme from the point of view of both assisting the poorest in the world and creating employment at home. Under no circumstances would I suggest the idea of tied aid.

The Minister of State referred to the peer review of the development assistance committee of the OECD. I recall that one of their recommendations was to strengthen mechanisms for identifying potential conflicts and resolving existing tensions. In this respect, have the issues with regard to the first biennial report on Ireland's progress on policy coherence for development been agreed? This is one of the matters that has been raised with me. When is that likely to happen and when can we anticipate receipt of the first biennial report?

The development assistance committee also recommended greater enabling of external stakeholders here in Ireland. In particular, they recommended more regular dialogue with the interdepartmental committee on development, IDCD. They recommended publishing the schedule of IDCD meetings, sharing advance notice of agendas for meetings and inviting submissions from external stakeholders on the work of that committee.

I have two concluding questions. How has the change in measurement by EUROSTAT of our gross domestic product, which was to our benefit in 2014, affected the calculation of the percentage of gross national income that we contribute in ODA, and has that generated a bigger gap between us and our desired 0.7% target than the earlier measurement? The Minister of State mentioned that 2015 would be a landmark year in the global fight against poverty. I believe that this would be an opportune time to signal to the international community the priority that we as a country will attach to trying to achieve the 0.7% target. The third conference on financing for development is coming up in July. Would Deputy Sherlock envisage the establishment or outlining of a roadmap for achieving the 0.7% target in advance of that conference?

There is one other issue. I do not know how the Minister of State interacts with other Departments on Ireland's proposals and legislative measures on climate change. It is an area of significant importance in the part of the world we are trying to assist.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Deputy Smith is a former Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I am only asking. I stand over everything I stated at that time. Are the views of Irish Aid taken into account in the general scheme of things?

Chairman: We should try to speed up, if we can.

Deputy Eric Byrne: Under the breakdown of bilateral assistance, the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, will note that Ireland enjoys a good working relationship with NGOs internationally. It is amazing to think that, under the civil society and development education unit, a total of €84 million will be going towards Irish and international NGOs. The Irish will benefit from €65.4 million allocated to predominately Irish NGOs.

We pride ourselves as a committee in engaging in trade links, but we are conscious that human rights are always to the fore. My question to the Minister of State is as follows. In light of the vote today on the Colombia and Peru trade agreement, Ireland insisted in Europe on the incorporation of human rights labour clauses. We were very much to the fore in having that accepted by Europe. I note that in an American deal with Colombia, the Americans inserted a labour clause. The only reason we are as familiar with Colombia today is not to do with the Colombia Three, but is to do with the fact that our NGOs on the ground could see societal activities that ran counter to their and our philosophy - in other words, the abuse of human rights. How does the Department monitor cross-departmental activity? Today's debate about Peru and Colombia was led by the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, whose Minister

is Deputy Richard Bruton. Is there a disconnect between these international trade agreements, notwithstanding that built into them are substantial human rights conditions? Is implementation of these European agreements in regard to human rights monitored?

The lobbying by the NGOs today was to the effect that we should not sign the agreement. We do not have any NGOs in Peru because nobody is telling us anything about it. However, we are hearing about Colombia and the abuses that have occurred there in the past and about the peace talks currently taking place. Given Ireland's role in the area of human rights how can we reassure the NGOs who ask us not to support the trade agreement that the situation is being monitored and that the Government is prepared to feedback information in this regard to the national parliament throughout whatever mechanism is available? Is there available a mechanism through which feedback can be provided to this committee or the Joint Committee on Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation?

We respect the NGOs and their opinions. We know they witness human rights abuses. While clauses on labour and human rights are built into the agreements how can we assure them that, for example, the dos Santos regime is implementing them?

Chairman: I ask Members to bear in mind that Colombia is not a programme country.

Deputy Eric Byrne: I am asking about human rights issues.

Chairman: That is a matter relevant to another Minister and not the Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The big question arising in regard to Colombia is how the clauses built into an agreement are triggered when breaches occur. The difficulty is that there is no mechanism within any of the agreements which render them null and void when breaches occur.

I welcome that there has been no reduction in the gross allocation to overseas development aid, ODA. I welcome also that only 6% of the total Vote is being allocated for administrative costs, which is relatively low by international standards. I compliment the Department in that regard. I note a slight increase in the provision for salaries. There is supposed to be close monitoring of salaries and so on.

I note €10.05 million is being allocated for bilateral assistance and spending, which is a 3% reduction, and an increase in multilateral spending to €8.85 million, which is 31% increase. Is there any significant reason for this large increase? Many of us are of the view that bilateral assistance in the context of overseas development aid is the cornerstone of Irish Aid. We are told partner countries like to work with Ireland because it is seen as a fair and critical partner with no colonial baggage and so on. I am concerned that this is a policy shift. The Minister of State might comment on that.

Some €600,000 is being provided to meet the cost of implementation of the Africa strategy. Can the Minister of State confirm that Irish Aid will continue its work in this area? I note €1 million is provided for international emergency assistance. I welcome the increase in that regard. In regard to multilateral assistance, I am concerned that Ireland's anticipated contribution to the European Development Fund in 2015, when compared with the contribution for 2014, has significantly increased. As stated earlier, it is easy to monitor bilateral aid. However, when it comes to monitoring of multilateral aid money often goes astray, which is a cause of concern. Reference was made earlier to the Uganda situation. The larger a programme the greater the likelihood of money going astray.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan referred earlier to the joint monitoring team in Tanzania. The message from the MEPs with whom we have met is that they would like to know where the money is going. That makes sense. It also raises the profile in regard to the work we are doing. It is important there is an awareness of Ireland's activities in terms of supporting particular countries and the sacrifices being made in this regard by the people in Ireland. That makes sense all around. I am interested in hearing the Minister of State's response to the lack of oversight and transparency in regard to the European Development Fund, EDF. The allocation for multilateral assistance includes spending of €1.6 million in payments to support trade related capacity building initiatives within developing countries. The concern in this regard is that again the focus is on trade.

Our job is to review expenditure. We expect countries we are supporting to do this but, as a Parliament, we are not doing it. However, that is a discussion for another day. Perhaps it is the case that I am not familiar enough with the structures of the committee but would it be possible to hold additional private meetings during which the expenditure is outlined more fully to members such that we are confident enough to be able to go out and sell it. That is important in the context of the support for ODA.

Despite current experiences in Ireland there is huge support for what we are doing internationally. I commend the Department in that regard. I have nothing but admiration for many of the programmes in this area. The work done in the hospital in Tanzania was amazing. We need to ensure there is in place a structure which enables us to feed ideas and concerns to those involved in foreign or European affairs or other groups travelling abroad. That should be encouraged.

Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan: As stated, we provide €10 million in aid to Palestine. I have been to the West Bank twice. During the course of both visits I met a number of theatre, youth, heritage, disability and music and dance groups, none of which were in receipt of funding. There were some projects that were being funded by Italy. I was struck by the fact that we appear to be giving money to the same projects all of the time. Is there any leeway in this regard for new groups and organisations? Some of the people with whom I met were doing phenomenal work in the middle of very difficult situations, while getting on with their lives. I have discussed this issue with the embassy in Ramallah but I wanted to take this opportunity to highlight it here today.

While much of the focus in relation to Tanzania is on support for farming some of our partner countries have major coastlines. Is any emphasis being put on fishing, food-related processing and, perhaps, the seaweed industry? We discussed this issue with the Tanzanian parliamentarians during their visit here. I accept it is a broader issue. I remain supportive of the emphasis on farming because we know that growing food is for some people a way out of poverty. However, there is huge potential in the sea.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: As some of the questions are quite technical members might intervene if I miss any of the points made. In regard to the questions posed by Deputy Smith, as I understand it DAC praised Ireland for its work on policy coherence across Departments. A wide range of Departments participated in the review. Perhaps I missed something in the question articulated by the Deputy. An interdepartmental committee on development, which I will chair, is to be established. The task of that committee will be to build on the progress of the DAC review and to examine the new sustainable development goals. We should examine the possibilities for further engagement between NGOs and the committee. I have been at the Department for a relatively short time, and my experience so far has been that the relationship

between Irish Aid, the Minister, Department officials and the NGO community is flexible and open. There is very much an open door policy.

A question was asked about the response to Ebola. The Department of Health is the main funding Department to the WHO. With regard to the Irish response to Ebola, given that Sierra Leone is one of our partner countries in which we have an embassy and embassy staff, we were able to influence, cajole, nudge and ensure the international response was robust. There is a critique of whether the international response, through all of the international multilateral organisations, was quick enough, and the answer is patently “No”, but if one kicked the tyres on the Irish response one would see it was robust and immediate. The very weekend I was in Sierra Leone, after we had begun meetings with the President and various ministers in key departments, the UN mission was arriving, but we were already there on the ground. This allowed us to state what needed to happen in the response by virtue of our experience of working with key partner organisations such as GOAL, Concern and Plan. We knew exactly what needed to happen with regard to contact tracing and establishing phone banks so people could report in. I would argue our abilities on the ground were without par.

Deputy Brendan Smith: As a significant player, would we not complain to the WHO about its totally inadequate response to the Ebola outbreak? Under no circumstances was I questioning the Irish response.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I know that.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I was making the point that as a major contributor we should let our voice be heard before another delayed reaction occurs.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I take the point the Deputy is making and I assure him that absolutely and utterly there has been a response from the Irish Government at Geneva on these issues. The danger of situations such as these is the mistakes are repeated. I reassure the committee that not only were we very responsive and we influenced the international response, and great credit is due to our embassy staff, but we were also able to feed back into multilateral organisations, such as the EU, which is represented in Sierra Leone, the UN, WHO and other UN-affiliated organisations. When I say Sierra Leone, I mean the three most affected countries in west Africa. There is no doubt that we will use our experience to be able to influence future responses on issues such as Ebola should it arise again.

I wholeheartedly agree with the point made by Deputy Smith on tied aid, and I am in agreement with the Deputy on the idea of looking at potential procurement opportunities for Irish companies in order that they can build capacity, or at least they can be assisted. The Department title includes the word “trade” and there is no contradiction in assisting Irish SMEs with their relationships to build capacity for procurement opportunities through multilateral organisations such as the UN World Food Programme, or seeking to open doors in order that they can bid competitively for services which might be provided internationally. I hope this answers the question which has been posed.

The 0.7% target was set in 1973 - I was going to say as I recall but I was only a year old - and we should consider where Ireland was then. We are talking about Ireland now and this programme. The world has changed. In monetary terms, we provided €667 million in 2011, €629 million in 2012, and €637 million in 2013. There has been a slight increase on the 2012 figure. I take the point that one could contend that changes in GNP figures, which are the national accounting statistics, from the point of view of the EU or EUROSTAT, has probably made it look

a little better than it is. The Government is focused on stabilising it, which is what we did in the budget, and beginning to increase it, and staying focused on the 0.7% target. Obviously this target is predicated on future economic growth and the economy growing sustainably. We are still very mindful of this and we should not take our minds off the target. We should very much keep the focus on it, particularly in light of the upcoming negotiations *vis-à-vis* the sustainable development goals, in which Ireland will have a key part through the co-facilitation of talks. I absolutely and utterly understand the point made, but we will try to increase the monetary value and create an impact.

On Deputy Crowe's point on bilateral and multilateral engagements, we have had to keep faith with our commitment to multilateral organisations, particularly the European Development Fund. We have seen a monetary increase in total terms on the overall vote and package but with a slight decrease in Vote 27. Overall the monetary terms have increased. It speaks to the fact that while in percentage terms there has been a positive change of 0.3% between 2014 and 2015 and overall overseas development aid is increasing, Vote 27 has decreased slightly and we acknowledge this. We still retain the commitment and we are increasing it in monetary terms.

There is no shift in policy. I feel strongly that we are as good as the Irish Aid team we have, which I feel is excellent. The Department has many experts in humanitarian development and development related specialists. There is a strong sense of ensuring the relationship with the NGOs is strengthened. If I had one thing to say, which is a personal viewpoint subject to a tyre-kicking exercise, we could foresee further collaboration between organisations and NGOs on key thematic areas in certain geographies. It is an area I would like to examine further. Concern, GOAL, Plan and Trócaire are all excellent organisations, and there is no organisation which does not have excellence as part of its brief, but in certain geographical areas in which we are working, such as South Sudan or Ethiopia, with which we have a key partner country relationship, we could consider bedding down a greater degree of collaboration between organisations such as GOAL and Concern, which are already there giving humanitarian assistance and providing other programmes, to build a brand Ireland platform. The Development Assistance Committee's report states the impact is very strong with regard to taxpayer funding and how the agencies work and deliver. There is no shift in policy. We need to have a good mix of multilateral and bilateral engagement. Our bilateral engagement has become more successful because we have very strong ambassadorial teams in the key partner countries. We also have very strong NGOs, and there is a seamless relationship between the two. All of the members of the committee and I have seen this at first hand through various visits to the key partner countries.

I am not concerned about transparency. The Ugandan example and the systems that have been put in place since then allow us to ensure that there is an effective approach and a clear managerial line in relation to how we look at the programmes and the impact that they are delivering. If one looks at the key partner countries, because we have embassies there, we have embassy teams. The teams interact with government officials if the programme is being delivered at a governmental level, and they interact with NGOs if the programme is being delivered at NGO level. I am confident that there is a robust mechanism to ensure transparency in how the funding is delivered, but sometimes it is very hard to put a metric on it. When I was Minister of State with responsibility for research and innovation, I saw how metrics could be used. One could put a euro in at one end and one would know the impact in terms of intellectual property or if a job was created. However, it is very difficult to measure the number of lives one assists in a process such as we are discussing because aid is more nebulous, but one can see the effect when one is on the ground. When one meets workers from GOAL or Concern,

one can see the number of people they feed every day. That is sustaining life, but with development programmes, for example, sustainable agriculture programmes in places such as Tigray, one can see farmers and know that because of programmes supported by Irish Aid through the NGOs, not alone are they sustaining life and limb but they are also layering education and other benefits.

Deputy Crowe referred to the example of fistula and the work we are doing through the fistula hospital. There are further opportunities in terms of using the research infrastructure or knowledge we have to assist in garnering greater information in geographies such as Tigray which is part of a country with in excess of 90 million people. We must examine how we can work with people on the ground to get better statistics or to provide good maternal health programmes for women and to encourage them to go to community centres to deliver babies in a healthy space. Such an approach will ensure that we help Ethiopia to wipe out this problem once and for all. That is a key area on which we support action.

In response to Deputy Eric Byrne's question, one has international agreements through multilateral organisations such as the UN. He should forgive me if I have missed the point he made or the question he asked. The Government, through our ambassadorial teams in Geneva and New York, has a monitoring system of the human rights elements and the labour clauses and we are a constituent part of the UN organisations themselves. I refer to the UN High Commission for Refugees, for example. There is a monitoring element in that regard.

I will speak from my experience of dealing with the key partner countries we fund in sub-Saharan Africa and Vietnam. The framework for action is an excellent document, if I do say so myself, in terms of the work the people within the Department have done. There are high level outcomes. Three goals have been set out. The first is reduced hunger and stronger resilience. The second is sustainable development and inclusive economic growth and then one has better government, human rights and accountability. Ten outcomes are listed which I will not go into now. Underpinning that are key results areas that one expects. Everything we do has a monitoring effect. Our staff and people in the key partner countries are clued into the policy. If I am representing the Government in an engagement with the president of the Tigrayan region and, for example, we are supporting a programme in Tigray, it means that we must ensure that any programme we support measures up to the goals we have set ourselves on issues such as human rights. There is a mechanism in place.

One could take an approach to human rights to the effect that we are pulling the plug on the money if a country does not do X. Our foreign policy must be predicated on the idea that one deepens relationships and builds capacity, for example, from the point of view of education in order that an educated population grows up and has a better chance. We take a long-term view of what we do. There is no better example of engagement at bilateral level than when on a recent visit to China the President had to deliver a very nuanced message about what needs to be done from a human rights point of view. One takes opportunities like that while building up and deepening the relationships. There is a diplomacy to it, if one likes. I hope I have answered the questions adequately. Please let me know if I have not.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State for his contribution and for being so direct with us. It is interesting to talk about transparency. It was the auditor general's office that found the corruption in Uganda and Irish Aid funded the auditor general's office. The example shows how Irish Aid made a big difference. What happened was ironic as we upskilled and trained the people in the office in question.

MESSAGE TO DÁIL

I wish to be associated with the Minister of State's comments about Sinead Walsh and the team in Sierra Leone. They had to do difficult work on the ground, which the Minister of State saw for himself at first hand. The committee was there two years ago and we saw how difficult the situation was at that stage. It was obviously far worse during the middle of a crisis. The embassy teams abroad, in particular in the programme countries, are to be commended on their dedication and openness. As with anything else, they are always learning. I wish to make that point to the Secretary General, who is present, and to the Minister of State, and the other members of the team.

That completes consideration of the select committee's consideration of the Revised Estimates for 2015 in respect of Vote 27 – International Co-operation and Vote 28 – Foreign Affairs and Trade. A message to that effect will be sent to the Clerk of the Dáil.

I thank the witnesses: the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Charles Flanagan, the Minister of State, Deputy Sean Sherlock, and the Minister of State, Deputy Jimmy Deenihan, the Secretary General, Mr. Niall Burgess, Barrie Robinson from the political division, Adrian O'Neill from the Anglo-Irish section, Michael Gaffey from Irish Aid, John Conlan from the finance division, Fergal Mythen from the corporate services division, Michael Tiernan from Irish Aid and Gerard Gleeson from the finance division.

Message to Dáil

Chairman: In accordance with Standing Order 87, the following message will be sent to the Dáil:

The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimates for public services for the year ending 31 December 2015: Vote 27 – International Co-operation; and Vote 28 - Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The select committee adjourned at 5.20 p.m. *sine die*.