



# IPU Review

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## Is there a way round the wall?



NOTHING could demonstrate more graphically the impasse in the Middle East than the Great Wall of Israel – pictured here during a recent visit by an IPU delegation to Palestine led by Sir Gerald Kaufman MP.

And on the face of it nothing could have reinforced the stand-off more than the recent sweeping victory in the Palestinian elections scored by an organisation best known in the wider world for staging suicide bombings - Hamas.

No one of course can be very optimistic about this outcome - not only because of the need to overcome the bitterness caused by decades of death and destruction but also the past involvement of Hamas in terrorist activity against Israel.

But as Lord Kilclooney points out in this issue there are parallels to be drawn with ending the strife in Northern Ireland.

Over the next few pages, we

have articles from six parliamentarians who either visited the Palestinian Authority and East Jerusalem in November or monitored the elections in January. Unfortunately, it was not possible to visit the Israeli Knesset on these occasions.

As they report inside, the IPU-nominated team from Britain who helped the international team monitoring the Palestinian elections, found that the poll was conducted fairly – and with an impressive 77 per cent turn out.

Now the focus will be on the elections in Israel on 28 March. We hope to send a delegation there later in the year to see the view from the other side.

Just as spreading democracy led to the dismantling of the Cold War icon – the Berlin Wall in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century - perhaps one day its influence will bring down political barriers and make this wall another relic of history.

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*IN January, the British Group IPU nominated five parliamentarians to help monitor the first elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council for ten years. Along with other international observers, they visited polling stations to check that the elections were fair. Over the next few pages, some of them give their personal accounts of what they saw in this historic poll.*



**By Richard Burden MP**  
**Chair, all party**  
**Palestine Group**

**M**ANY international observers have reported witnessing a carnival atmosphere on polling day in most parts of the West Bank and Gaza.

The numbers of Palestinians voting put the turnout in our own recent general elections to shame.

By and large, polling stations were also run efficiently and voting lists checked thoroughly. By all accounts this was a professionally conducted election and a genuine example of democracy in action amongst the Palestinian people.

This achievement was all the more remarkable as the elections took place against the background of continued occupation of Palestinian territories.

On polling day, Israeli forces kept a relatively low profile and Palestinians were able to organise their election without significant interference in most places. The big exception was Jerusalem.

Under international law, the status of East Jerusalem is no different from the rest of the West Bank. It has been occupied territory since Israel captured it during the six day war of 1967.

Israel, however, does not recognise the land is occupied. Some years ago it declared the annexation of East Jerusalem. To the Israeli Government - even if not to the Palestinians and the outside world - Jerusalem is now the eternal and undivided capital of the state of Israel.

In the run-up to the elections,

there was doubt about whether Israel would allow Palestinian East Jerusalemites to vote at all if Hamas candidates were on the ballot paper.

In the event, the issue was dodged. Supporters of Hamas stood under the banner of *Democracy and Reform*. Everyone knew it was a fiction but it allowed Israel to turn a blind eye.

Indeed, the fiction that East Jerusalem is not really part of the Palestinian territories at all runs through the terms of a deal which was cobbled together during Oslo negotiations to allow the first Palestinian parliamentary elections to go ahead in 1996.

This means that the Palestinian Central Elections Commission is not allowed to organise the poll in East Jerusalem at all. Israel does not allow any polling stations there. Instead, Palestinian East Jerusalemites who are eligible to vote in the City itself must vote in six, designated Post Offices.

Ballot papers are issued by Israeli post office staff over the counter. The Palestinian voter fills in the ballot paper there (in full view of the counter staff - there are no polling booths), puts the completed ballot paper in an envelope and hands the envelope back to the postal clerk who then puts it into a ballot box behind the counter.

Unlike normal ballot boxes, the slot in this one is in the side of the box, not at the top. It is more like a letter box. The fiction is that the Palestinian is casting a postal vote for elections elsewhere.

From what I could see inside the main Salah Addin post office near the Damascus Gate at the entrance to the Old City, these bizarre arrangements were undertaken in a broadly professional manner by postal staff.

However, that does not alter the fact that it is simply unacceptable to require people to participate in a "secret" ballot in full view of someone else. It is not only unacceptable as an electoral procedure; making Palestinians do it in front of an employee of the Israeli state is a grotesque humiliation.

The picture is one of voting being a "privilege" bestowed by the grace

## Palestinian poll

and favour of an occupying authority on condition that the voter pretends to be an absentee voter in his or her own city.

The deal may have got the negotiators out of a difficult spot in 1996 but it has no place in a free and fair election.

The Israeli Government would be outraged if Palestinians attempted to interfere with the voting arrangements for Israeli settlers in the West Bank even though the settlements in which they live are built on occupied Palestinian land and are illegal under international law.

So Israel has no business interfering with the voting arrangements for Palestinians living in East Jerusalem.

Unfortunately, the interference goes further than this. There are over 250,000 Palestinians holding Jerusalem ID cards issued by Israel. Of these, around 150,000 live in the outskirts of the municipality; an area known as J2.

In East Jerusalem itself - an area known as J1 - the total number of eligible voters is approximately 125,000.

Of these, however, Israel only allowed around 6,000 to cast their votes in the Jerusalem post offices. The rest would have to travel to the outskirts of the city - to the J2

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THE articles in this publication reflect the personal views of the authors concerned and are not necessarily shared by the British Group as a whole.

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*Continued from previous page*

throughout polling day, but that failed to stop the crowds amassing outside the polling stations. I was struck by the extent to which the Palestinian parties, although relative electoral novices, adopted the same electoral tactics as UK parties: for example, leaflets with mocked-up ballot papers, urging voters to put their cross next to a particular candidate, and a stall outside one polling station, where Hamas activists crossed voters off their lists.

Contrary to predictions, the day passed peacefully, with a festive atmosphere on the streets as Hamas and Fatah supporters gathered. Hordes of children, decked out in headbands, keffiyah and baseball caps, mostly in the green colours of Hamas, waved flags enthusiastically, handed out leaflets and posed for photos.

Young women were also very much in evidence; most - despite concerns raised with us by a women's NGO about the party's Islamist agenda - also supporting Hamas. (There were quotas for women in the party list section, so all parties fielded female candidates. A number of seats were also reserved for Christian candidates, without which Fatah would have been even more humiliated in the poll).

Observers noted a few minor infringements of electoral procedures - a handful of children handing out leaflets inside the polling centres (which were confiscated); some confusion over what to do with a spoilt ballot paper; an occasional breach of the rule allowing only one observer from each party inside each polling station - but nothing to give real cause for concern.

We had been told to watch out for signs of intimidation, assisted voting, and families being marshalled to vote en masse, but no-one reported any cause for concern.

A notable exception was voting by the security forces, which took place over the previous three days so they would be free to maintain order on polling day; assisted voting was reportedly rife, and resulted in 95 per cent support for their paymasters, Fatah.

The elections were, all observers concluded, a shining example of democracy in action.

With a 74.6 per cent turnout (which would have been higher if all the 120,000 or so Palestinians in East Jerusalem had been allowed to vote there) we could, here in the UK, perhaps learn lessons from them about voter participation and political engagement.



*Teachers act as voting clerks at a school polling station*



*The IPU-nominated monitoring team: Lord Kilclooney, Kerry McCarthy MP, Richard Burden MP, Shahid Malik MP and Pauline McNeill, Member, Scottish Parliament*



### **By Shahid Malik MP**

MAGNIFICENT, awesome, inspiring: all words used by international observers to

describe the Palestinian elections, and they were not exaggerating.

I went to the West Bank and witnessed a near-flawless exhibition of democracy in action. The turnout of around 74.6 per cent would be envied across the western world, being almost a third greater than in recent US, UK and Israeli elections.

There was an unconcealed pride in these elections and on election day I asked a Hamas supporter who he thought would win - his response, 'the people will win'. And as the Palestinians in Jenin refugee camp were eager to point out, they are at the top of the Arab premier league of democracies. In fact, they are probably the only Arab nation in that league.

After all we had heard about Palestine and its factional infighting, it was a surprise to see the likes of Fatah, Hamas, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades and others campaigning in a carnival atmosphere outside polling stations.

It felt more like Notting Hill than Nablus, though the two couldn't be further apart, for Nablus has the highest fatalities in the West Bank, the most severe structural damage and the most draconian restrictions of movement. But with music blaring, banners across the streets, flags waving, and men, women and children all savouring the atmosphere - in this instance, comparison with London's carnival district could be forgiven.

The festivities were the more remarkable given that it all took place under Israeli occupation. Restrictions on the movement of candidates and voters undoubtedly reduced the turnout.

Voters in East Jerusalem were the worst abused. Of more than 100,000 eligible Palestinian residents, only 6,300 were allowed to vote there, and even then they had to fill in their ballot papers on Israeli post office counters and hand them over to staff, entirely compromising the secrecy of the process.

I toured Nablus on polling day. The death toll there stands at 522 since 2000, including 80 children and 28 women. Curfews have lasted for up to 151 days.

Earth mounds, concrete blocks, checkpoints, road

gates and trenches have cut off the city from the rest of the West Bank, crippling the economy and denying Palestinians access to medical treatment.

Jimmy Carter, the former US president leading a delegation of international observers, weighing up the difficulties of holding an election 'under occupation', concluded: "The fact the Palestinians managed to pull off these elections is a near-miracle."

As for the result, the landslide victory for Hamas demonstrated the truth of the old saying that opposition parties seldom win elections, governments lose them. Ten years of power for Fatah with little opposition to keep it in check, corruption rife, a divided party unable to agree on its candidates, poverty the reality for many Palestinians (albeit made far worse by Israeli occupation) and peace seemingly as distant as ever, had left their toll.

If this was indeed a protest vote, then it was surely the mother of all protest votes. Interestingly, in view of widespread fears that Hamas' Islamist agenda will curb women's rights in the new Palestine, it was clear where the women's votes were cast. They turned out in their droves as Hamas candidates and supporters, decked in sashes and hijabs in the green colours of Hamas.

International reactions have been confused. Polls show that 50 per cent of Israelis want their government to talk to Hamas leaders, but so far this has not been reflected in the official Israeli response, nor in that of the international community.

Threats to withdraw international funding unless Hamas renounces violence and recognises Israel's right to exist have undoubted leverage when 30 per cent of Palestinian families rely on such funding for survival. According to James Wolfensohn, the big-power Quartet's special envoy to the region, the Palestinian Authority is "basically bankrupt".

The future of Palestine is now in the hands of President Mahmoud Abbas, a man who from a Palestinian perspective is clean of corruption, and from an Israeli perspective isn't bloodied by violence. He is often described as a steady, consolidating type of figure, calm and lacking the charisma of Yasser Arafat - perhaps just what is required at such times.

I believe the participation of Hamas and other militant groups in the elections is a positive thing - I learned as an equality commissioner in Northern Ireland that this represents engagement with democracy, a step towards the end of participation in violence.

Of course, when one looks at some of the candidates Hamas fielded - including one known as "Hitler" for his hatred of Jews - Israel's stance seems understandable.

But it is worth remembering something: one of the worst terrorist atrocities committed in the region, the killing of 91 people in Jerusalem's King David Hotel in 1946, was carried out by a Jewish group called Irgun.

And the man who led Irgun, Menachem Begin, went on to become the prime minister of Israel who made peace with Egypt.

## Lessons from Northern Ireland



Lord Kilclooney of Armagh

THIS was my fifth visit to Israel and Palestine having been Chairman of the

Middle East Committee of the Council of Europe, then the Council's Rapporteur for the Middle East, and last year a member of Strasbourg's monitoring delegation for the Palestinian Presidential Election.

As leader of that delegation I reported to the bureau of the Council of Europe that I would not be surprised if Hamas won the election to the Palestinian Legislative Council then scheduled for July 2005. Its subsequent postponement gave Hamas even more time to improve its election machinery and to expose the failure of Fatah. The overwhelming victory by Hamas came as no surprise to me.

The election was fair and efficient. It was a pleasure to witness the large and orderly turnout by Arabs — Moslem and Christian — in order to record their democratic rights.

Of course, the election campaign was difficult due to the restrictions imposed by Israel on freedom of movement and the decision by Israel that only 6,000 Palestinians out of a total of 120,000 in East Jerusalem were allowed to vote in Jerusalem. The others had to get out of their home city in order to vote!

I see so many parallels between political developments in Palestine and what I have experienced as a former Minister in Northern Ireland and one of the three Ulster Unionists who negotiated the Belfast Agreement in 1998.

Just as Hamas has a terrorist personality so has Sinn Fein/IRA. It was an outrage for Unionists to suggest that Sinn Fein would be in government in Northern Ireland.

Likewise, just as Hamas refuses to recognise the independence and sovereignty of Israel, so the Irish Republic refused to recognise that Northern Ireland was part of the United Kingdom — indeed the Southern Irish constitution claimed jurisdiction over Northern Ireland.

These obstacles were overcome and so they can be in the Middle East. Indeed, I once gave a copy of the Belfast Agreement to Yasser Arafat in Ramallah. There was an element of fudge in the Belfast Agreement and the jury is still out. But it did achieve peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland.

Today unemployment in Northern Ireland - once amongst the highest levels in Europe - is now lower than in many other UK Regions and lower than the EU average.

The people of the Irish Republic amended their Constitution and abandoned their territorial claim over Northern Ireland. Then Sinn Fein, inextricably linked to the IRA, entered the NI Government and their two inexperienced politicians - like Hamas members — proved to be effective Ministers.

Can the same be achieved in the Middle East?

I remain optimistic. Israel and Hamas are like two sides of the same coin. Both are extremes but the



*Sign warning voters not to carry guns in polling booths*

*Please turn to the back page*



*Sir Gerald Kaufman MP and members of the delegation in Hebron*



**By Sir Gerald Kaufman MP**

**T**he first-ever delegation from the British Group of the IPU to the Palestine National Authority took place in November.

It was, we hope, useful for our hosts, who went to enormous trouble both to make us welcome and to provide a full programme for us.

For the British MPs and Peers, particularly those to whom the Palestinian territories were a new experience, it was far more - a lesson in how to try to live in a territory under a military occupation.

So, of course, there were the formal meetings (plus lunches and dinners) with Palestinian ministers and other dignitaries at which there was copious discussion. These, however, were as much instructive for the circumstances in which they took place as for what was said.

The meeting in Ramallah with our own Mr Speaker's counterpart, Mr Rawhi Fattouh, was held very shortly after Mr Fattouh's brother had been murdered in a terrorist attack in Amman, Jordan.

The meeting with Mr Salah Tamari, the Governor of Bethlehem, was held just as the Israelis had imposed a new barrier which made it almost impossible for Bethlehem to function as a living town.

Our visit to the ancient city of Hebron was memorable for, among many other incidents, our having to bribe our way out if we were not to spend the night as unwilling guests of the Hebron Palestinians and virtual prisoners of the Israeli occupying forces.

A visit to Tulkarm almost did

not take place at all because Israeli troops controlling the checkpoint at the entry at first were unwilling to allow us to enter - for the Kafkaesque reason that our minibus had Israeli licence-plates.

Indeed, though they might not have known it - and might not have cared if they had - the troops were in a sense our instructive hosts in making this delegation not simply a worthwhile exchange of courtesies and information but a lesson in Israeli policy.

We might have regretted the minimum of facilities that the British Consulate-General could provide for this Palestinian-hosted visit (though they did give us a dinner at which we met several informative Palestinians) if it were not that the absence of diplomatic protection at checkpoints (of which there are more than 600) gave us a taste of what life is like under stringent occupation.

As I pointed out to my colleagues, the harassment to which we were subjected - including the invasion of our minibus by an ostentatiously armed Israeli soldier and our being held at gun-point by Israeli soldiers in Hebron - was as nothing compared to the obstructions which make daily life certainly miserable and in many ways intolerable for Palestinians. And we were going home on Friday while the Palestinians were stuck there permanently.

## Life and strife

The rude and arrogant questioning to which we were subjected at Tel-Aviv airport when we were seeking to leave did at least end in our getting on a plane and coming back to Westminster, whereas Palestinians are staggeringly lucky if they are able to travel at all. Back at Westminster, we reported back to fellow-IPU members, instigated debates in Westminster Hall and in the House of Lords and put questions to the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary.

The IPU staff had worked wonders in arranging a programme in a location where it is almost a Biblical miracle to turn up on time.

Kenneth Courtenay, the BGIPU's General Secretary, who accompanied us and had to share all our tribulations - as well as put up with us - was the model of urbanity and efficiency.

While we were in the territories, we heard much of prepara-



*Map showing the route of Israel's wall in red*

# behind the wall

tions for the Palestinians' first elections for ten years. That even the victors of the elections, Hamas, conformed to the norms of electoral orthodoxy was living tribute to the Westminster model, of which the IPU is the exemplar.

Palestine is the home of the three great monotheistic religions, and our delegation not only had the opportunity of visiting the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem - sadly forlorn in its lack of pilgrims due to restrictions on access - and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, in an Old City almost denuded of visitors.

We visited, too, the great Muslim shrines, including the Dome of the Rock, from which the prophet Mohammed ascended, and the El-Aqsa Mosque and, nearby, the surviving Western Wall of the Israelites' Jewish temple.

We also saw, at Tulkarm and elsewhere, the hideous separation wall being built by today's Israelis.

In this strife-torn Holy Land, we learned, paradoxes do not have to be invented. They are part of the eternal landscape.



By Tom Levitt MP

**A** NYWHERE else in the world they would call it ethnic cleansing.

Make it inconvenient for those who live outside the city to work in it through the selective use of road blocks, and they will take their labour elsewhere. Surround their village with a guarded wall so it is accessible only by foot and the population will eventually move out.

Use a concrete barrier to separate farmers from their fields, families from their loved ones and children from schools and they too will go. Harass the locals by declaring that new roads are inaccessible to them because of their race and block off access to their very homes with concrete blocks.

In this environment, the outcome of the recent Palestinian election is of little surprise. All these and more are the tactics of the Israeli occupying army in the West Bank. East Jerusalem, a city



*Tom Levitt MP at the wall*

holy to Christians, Jews and Muslims is already in places a no-go area for Palestinians.

Yet it is the source (until recently) of over 40 per cent of Palestine's earned income.

Surely no policy of using armed troops to maintain 680 road blocks daily in someone else's tiny country can be justified or tolerated? Over half of the 680km so-called 'defensive' wall is now complete.

Building continues despite the ruling of the International Courts. 80 per cent of its planned length is inside Palestinian territory (rather than on the border) and nearly ten per cent of Palestine is on the 'wrong' side of the Wall, including some of the most productive aquifers in the region and some of Palestine's most fertile land, near Bethlehem.

The pre-1967 border between Israel and the West Bank is the basis of the Road Map, the best available option for establishing two separate, sovereign and viable states, as envisaged by the 1948 partition.

Yet in places the grabbing fingers of this massive concrete edifice will stretch 20km inside Palestinian territory at a cost greater than the Palestinian Authority has to run its country for a year.

Israeli soldiers do not stand idly by their roadblocks. Israel holds nearly 9,000 political detainees, most of whom were arrested on Palestinian territory and then jailed in Israel in breach of international conventions.

Lawyers tell us that almost 300 are children and that 650 are being held without charge.

So why is Israel suffocating and strangling its weaker neighbour? What does it have to gain?

It is not security. The threat from individual bombers was diminishing even before construction started and its progress coincides with a protracted ceasefire from Hamas.

With Israel to the west and the occupied Jordan Valley to the east, the 'safe' transit routes and ribbon development already look like the rungs of a ladder, dividing Palestine into ever smaller units with little or no communication between them.

Economic and social planning become impossible for the fledgling Palestinian democracy and the Road Map's dependence on a viable West Bank is called into question.

The country is taking on a 'Swiss cheese' appearance with local control only of the holes within an Israeli-controlled infrastructure.

The leadership of the Fatah movement, recently in government, is intelligent, responsible and multi-ethnic: some senior members are not Muslims but Christians.

But it is weak, poor, frustrated. They had little to show for years of abdicating the bullet and the bomb, though I sense little desire to return to former days.

Fatah was always going to be vulnerable in the general election, and the result is potentially destabilising to the peace process.

If there is a resurgence of terrorism, Israel will say they were right to be cautious and that their clampdown on the West Bank was justified. If there is no such resurgence, they will claim that their suppression has worked. Catch 22.

The political equations are not looking good. After several years of occupied pseudo-independence, the Palestinian Authority could demonstrate too few meaningful outcomes to its electorate in the run-up to the recent election.

Even if Palestinians have done better being in government than out of it, Israel's use of roadblocks, no go areas and general harassment make it impossible for the Palestinian Authority to govern or the economy to bloom.

It is little wonder that ordinary people looked elsewhere - to Hamas, the voice of desperation - for electoral solace.

*JOHN Bercow MP and Ann McKechin MP represented the British Group IPU in the parliamentary conference at the recent, disappointing WTO talks in Hong Kong. Here they give their verdicts on the meeting - and outline their views on the way forward to achieve fair trade to help the world's poverty-stricken nations.*



**By John Bercow MP  
Member of the Select Committee for  
International Development**

**D**ECEMBER'S WTO Ministerial in Hong Kong offered the chance to take the Doha Development round forward, acting decisively to remove trade distorting subsidies and to improve access for developing countries' products.

However, the result was, at best, a series of micro-steps. Whilst positive progress was made to end export subsidies, little attention was paid to cutting trade distorting domestic subsidies.

Though expectations of the meeting were low, the outcome remains a disappointment, not least as the participants deferred far more than they decided.

The penalty for failure is all the more severe when contrasted with the prize that success would offer. Trade is not a panacea for poverty but it is easily the most effective means to escape it.

If sub-Saharan Africa was able to increase its share of global trade by just one per cent, it would raise \$70 billion more from exports, almost five times the combined total of aid and debt relief to the region.

Grotesque trade discrimination is making the poor poorer. So a vital aim of the Doha Development Round of trade talks is to tackle the scandal of agricultural subsidies.

In 2003, OECD countries spent \$312 billion on agricultural subsidies, more than the income of the whole of sub-Saharan Africa and 15 times the total OECD aid to Africa.

Between them, industrialised countries are subsidising farmers to the tune of \$1 billion a day. The dairy industry cries out for criticism.

Each dairy cow in the EU receives an income of \$2 a day – meanwhile two billion people in the developing world are struggling to exist on less than that.

The direct result of these policies is that Mali, which has 6.5 million cattle, imports 9000 tonnes of powdered milk each year.

In 2001, subsidised European farmers exported 21000 tonnes of powdered milk to West Africa, unfairly undercutting local producers, devastating local industry and leaving the region to sink deeper into poverty as its farmers flounder in a flood of European milk.

There was significant progress at Hong Kong when the developed countries agreed to end export subsidies by 2013.

However, within the EU, export subsidies account for just 3.5% of agricultural support.

## World's rich nations are told:

Far too little has been done to end the gross injustice of trade distorting domestic subsidies.

Some effort was made to tighten the rules on domestic support but it is a disgrace that the EU plans to increase trade-distorting domestic subsidies, which already total almost 63.9 billion Euros, thereby continuing to promote dumping and damaging the incomes of the poorest people on the planet

On cotton, the result of the Ministerial was a terrible let down and did not even go as far as the findings of the WTO cotton dispute panel. Agreement to eliminate export subsidies by 2006 was welcome but not unexpected, given that it was necessary in order to comply with an existing WTO ruling.

Moreover, export subsidies account for just 10% of the \$4 billion the US spends annually supporting its cotton farmers.

The United States refused to give way on the issue of domestic support beyond a limited commitment to reduce other trade-distorting subsidies faster and further for cotton than for other crops.

Dumping cost poor African countries, where over ten million people depend directly on cotton, more than \$400 million between 2001 and 2003 and is likely to continue.

Duty-free, quota-free market access for LDCs was another issue at Hong Kong. Given that the EU and Canada had already agreed DFQF packages, such as the EU's *Everything But Arms*, these negotiations were a test of the commitment of the United States and Japan.

The final agreement that DFQF will be provided to all LDCs by 2008 for at least 97% of all products was a significant step.

However, the 3% that can still be protected covers 330 tariff lines. Given that developing countries tend to rely on a small number of key exports, the DFQF will still deny LDCs the chance to compete and grow.

Textiles are the major example of this. The 97% ceiling will allow the United States to continue to protect its textile and garment industries.

Countries such as Bangladesh, where two million people, 1.6 million of them women, work in the garment sector, will be denied DFQF access and thus will be unable fully to utilise trade as the engine of growth and development.

Once again, decisions on the big issues have been deferred. The deadline for concluding the Doha round, initially scheduled for December 2004, has been postponed until the end of 2006, though few commentators expect this target to be met.

The leading industrialised countries should stop pussy-footing around and start making meaningful development offers.

Trade injustice is condemning people to a future trapped in poverty. It is wrecking industries and ruining lives.

Removal of such injustice should be the relentless focus of trade negotiators so that the world gets a good deal without further delay.

*“Trade injustice is wrecking industries and ruining lives”*

# stop pussy-footing around



By Ann McKechin MP  
Chair of the all party Group on Debt,  
Aid and Trade, and Member of the  
Select Committee for International  
Development

THE Hong Kong WTO Ministerial conference in December, as predicted, wasn't the big breakthrough that most commentators said that we needed but on the other hand the talks didn't collapse and all the members agreed the need to make urgent progress.

After four years of turgid negotiation and increasingly bad tempered exchanges between the main players with continual criticism from a wide range of civic society and campaigning groups, why is the show still on the road?

History tells us that trade negotiations are normally long drawn out affairs – the Uruguay round took longer and did not start out with such an ambitious agenda as the current Doha round.

But it is also undeniable that a multilateral settlement as compared with a large number of often conflicting and distorting bilateral deals makes logical sense and is much more likely to provide what our Chinese hosts stated should be a “win/win” agenda.

However, in a compelling speech to the WTO Parliamentary conference held at the same time as the Ministerial, Duncan Campbell, Policy Director of the International Labour Organisation, pointed out that in the last 30 years there has been a growing disconnect between employment rates and economic growth which inevitably leads to a rise in protectionist sentiments if unemployment levels remain high.

He argued that there needed to be a much higher priority given to policy coherence between trade and labour sectors of government so that more aid for trade was directed at labour market preparedness and providing greater social protection.

These protectionist sentiments run deep, leading to politicians frequently speaking on the one hand about the need for an ambitious development orientated agenda but on the other hand offering up what amounts to only a relatively small fraction of their own markets.

It is understandable that many of the world's developing nations are cautious given their past experiences but the reluctance of western nations, including the EU, Japan and the USA, to substantially reduce their own trade barriers remains the biggest hurdle.

There was a great deal of talk by US and EU negotiators about the need for a “balanced round” which strikes many people, particularly those in the developing world, as frankly a contradiction of the stated purpose of achieving a good pro-development result that tackles the chronic “imbalance” created by the previous Uruguay round.

The EU can probably offer somewhat more on the thorny issue of agricultural domestic subsidies whilst retaining their current agreement on CAP.

But it was simply incongruous of them to insist that they wouldn't budge unless nations such as Brazil, which still has 15 million of its population living in absolute poverty, gave concessions on industrial tariffs.

At the same time, the USA offer is currently so conditional that many members did not accept it as credible.

During the negotiations, the powerful G20 group whose members include China, India and Brazil joined forces with other developing nations at Hong Kong to form a G110 group in an effort to counter the apparent “tug of war” between the USA and the EU and ensure that the issue of agricultural reform was not pushed to the side.

The final communiqué stated a resolution to find agreement on a very wide number of outstanding key points in an incredibly tight timetable.

Given the record of current negotiations there must be strong scepticism that these deadlines can be met.

However, all eyes are focused on the expiry of the US presidential negotiating mandate in 2007 – if there is no agreement by then it may be many years before an effective multilateral treaty can be reached.

Recent developments at the Davos World Economic Forum in January may give some cautious grounds for optimism.

The major players in the negotiations agreed a “work programme” to allow all key issues – agriculture, services and industrial – to move at the same time but substantive offers are still to be

made.

What can we expect over the next few months? The original agenda has been rightly criticised as being over wields and it does not seem feasible that consensus can be reached on such a diverse range of issues over what is now only a period of months, not years.

If the larger member nations can avoid sniping at each other and concentrate on the need to get a deal done, we may yet see some limited form of agreement by the end of this year.

In that event, the development gains will be much lower but hopefully will enhance the existing offers on aid for trade and market access for the world's poorest as well as eliminating some of the more harmful trade subsidies.

The WTO over the last four years has reflected a growing shift in power to the new and emerging world economies, and it is clear that the political landscape is changing fast.

A limited agreement could allow all sides to take some comfort in keeping the ideal of multilateral agreements alive in the political conscience whilst at the same time perhaps learning that the issue of employment has to be central in their approach to future trade rounds.

*“If the larger member nations can avoid sniping at each other and concentrate on the need to get a deal done, we may yet see some limited form of agreement by the end of this year”*



*During a recent visit to Gabon, an IPU delegation went to a research centre where some gorillas, chimpanzees and Mandrills are kept.*

*Here, Roger Gale MP gives his personal impressions of what he saw.*

**By Roger Gale MP**

**H**e stands in the centre of his concrete compound, heavy under the sun. His arms hang loosely by his sides and his head rocks gently and aimlessly from side to side. He displays the stereotypical behaviour of a being that has been held in captivity for too long.

“He” is not a political prisoner or a dangerous criminal. He is a silverback gorilla.

He has been taken from his native rain-forest home and is held behind tough iron bars in the interests of medical and, it is whispered darkly, military science.

We met him, and others like him, at the Centre International de Recherches Medicales (CIRMF) in Franceville during a British Group IPU visit a few months ago to Gabon in Africa. There are, perhaps, five of these great apes contained in pens.

They are not short of space, and there are sleeping quarters where the animals may take shelter and shade. There are toys, of a sort. The occasional rope, rubber tyre or metal slide is, though, scarcely sufficient distraction to prevent a once-proud beast from going mad.

The same establishment houses a colony of chimpanzees and a further colony of Mandrill monkeys.

The Director General of this institute makes our visiting delegation welcome, courteously and comprehensively responds to every question and escorts us around the facilities. We are denied access to little and allowed to take photographs at will. Only the unit that houses the highly contagious of the animals is closed to us.

We could, we are told, go inside but that would require many changes of clothing and other protective measures that would take more time than we have available.

## The Silverback

The Director tells us that the Mandrills are being used to probe the causes of AIDS and to try to gain an insight into the reasons why the simian version of this condition is not fatal to apes and monkeys in the way that it is so terrifyingly fatal to human beings.

The whole centre covers 40 square miles and employs a staff of 150 research personnel, including administrative staff, of eight nationalities such as American, British, French and Congolese.

It is funded by the French Government and the International Medical Council and, in addition to the AIDS-related work, is engaged in “other research” and training.

The Centre participates, we are told, in television programmes and submits articles to learned publications. Its work is “essential to mankind” and respectable.

But....

**A**way from this Institute, others tell us that while the Mandrills are used for investigations into the causes and spread of AIDS, the other primates are used for military research commissioned by a French Government that still has an interest in this former French colony.

We cannot verify this assertion, and while it does have a ring of authoritative truth about it, the staff of the institute do not give the impression that they have a dark secret to hide.

The dark secret, in a sense, is there for all to see. It simply cannot be right that great and endangered species can be taken from the wild or, as we are told in the case of the gorillas, from huge reserves, and incarcerated in conditions akin to Alcatraz.

Back in the UK, I seek advice from experts. There is, it seems, no possibility whatsoever that the gorillas and chimpanzees and Mandrills can be released back into the wild.



*Roger Gale MP, accompanied by Tobias Ellwood MP, with a green lizard found during their visit to Gabon*

# of “Alcatraz”

They will have become so institutionalised that they would certainly - and swiftly - die.

There is, though, a real chance that their lot can be improved and that they could, if the will is there, enjoy the end of their days in better and more suitable surroundings.

To achieve this will require the political support of the Government of Gabon, the help of experts in this field, and money. The latter, particularly, is in short supply.

Over and over again we are asked how we can expect developing countries that are saddled with debt, held to ransom by the financial institutions of the world and unable to provide even basic healthcare, education and food for children, to take care of animals. It is a fair question to which there is no easy answer.

If, though, the natural resources - the rainforests, the flora and the fauna - are not preserved and cared for, then the opportunities for eco-tourism and related industries that have the potential to create much wealth will be lost for ever. Once the great apes, for instance, are extinct there will be no magical dna-generated return.

I left Gabon with a mixture of joy and sadness. We met charming and hospitable people, and we were privileged to catch at least a glimpse of a habitat that is fast disappearing and that many have only ever seen and will only ever see on film.

We also left behind some caged animals that need our help.

We must, of course, work to secure debt relief and fair trade and to help to secure good governance so that the developing world can rise and enjoy health and prosperity.

Surely we must, also, devote some time and energy to seeking to protect those living beings that cannot protect themselves.



## Fact file: Gorillas

THERE are two species of gorilla: the western and the eastern gorilla.

There are two sub-species of western gorilla: western lowland gorilla and the Cross River gorilla and two sub-species of eastern gorilla: the eastern lowland and the mountain gorilla.

The western lowland gorilla is the most widespread of all the gorilla sub-species, ranging through southern Cameroon, the south-west corner of the Central African Republic, west Congo (Brazzaville), Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and southwards to the Cabinda enclave of Angola.

There is no reliable estimate of the total numbers of western lowland gorillas because they inhabit thick rainforest where it is difficult to count them. The forests of Gabon are considered to harbour the major population, although it is possible that unsurveyed areas of Congo may contain equivalent numbers.

Surveys in Gabon have established that western lowland gorillas occur at higher densities throughout a wider range of forest habitats than was previously thought. The total western lowland gorilla population in central Africa may number as many as 110,000.

Nevertheless, the western lowland gorilla is categorised as “endangered” because of habitat loss and poaching pressure; the population in Equatorial Guinea is probably critically endangered.

Population figures of the four sub-species of gorilla are:

Western lowland



gorilla: endangered (111,000)

Cross River gorilla: critically endangered (200)

Eastern lowland gorilla: endangered (3,000-5,000 in 1980)

Mountain gorilla: critically endangered (650)

Gorillas have a well-developed social structure, living and travelling in family groups which vary from 2 to 35 individuals, but more typically number 5 to 10.

A group of gorillas typically consists of a single dominant “silverback” male, three adult females, and four or five offspring.

Gorillas have a home range of between 5 to 30 sq km and are mainly herbivorous, feeding on stems, shoots and fruit supplemented with bark and invertebrates.

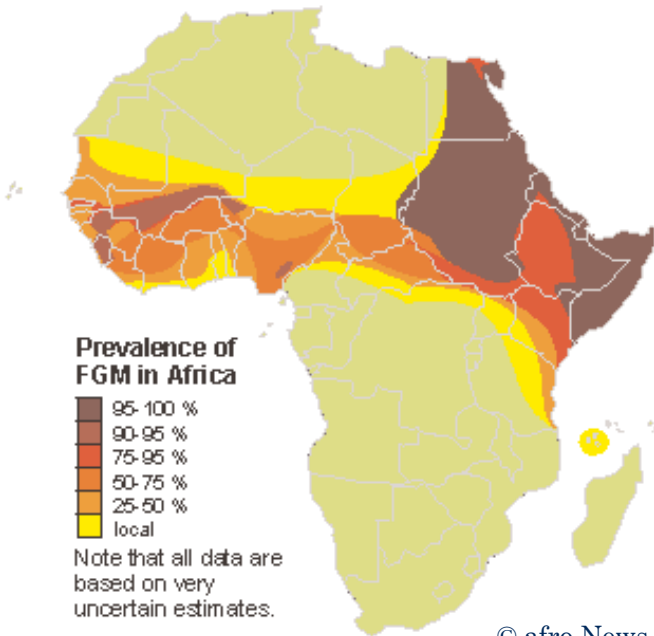
Gorillas eat large amounts of vegetation from more than 70 different plant species - including, for large males, up to 33kg of bamboo a day.

The three major threats to gorillas are:

- Habitat loss
- Trade in bushmeat
- Exposure to human diseases

Source: WWF  
[www.wwf.org.uk](http://www.wwf.org.uk)

# Stop inhumane operations on girls



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By Chris McCafferty MP and Baroness Tonge



**L**AST December, Senegal hosted a parliamentary conference on female genital mutilation (FGM) in Dakar.

Nearly 200 participants discussed this inhumane practice that is still widespread in many African societies.

There was a real need to bring African parliamentarians together, to enable them to exchange ideas and support each other in their commitment to the abandonment of female genital mutilation.

It's a practice that is detrimental to women's health and an offence against their human rights.

FGM still affects three million girls every year, and 100 to 140 million women and girls around the world have undergone some form of it. In the UK, it is estimated that 15,000 girls are at risk.

The conference aimed to inform MPs about progress towards eradicating FGM and the future challenges still to be faced. There were also workshops to discuss mechanisms for eliminating FGM, through legislation, enforcement, advocacies and local mechanisms.

We were selected to take part in the seminar which was organised by the IPU. As Chair of the All-

Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health, Chris McCafferty chaired the Group's hearings on FGM in November 2000. Baroness Tonge also participated in the hearings as a member of the APPG and has spoken on this issue many times in Parliament.

Britain tightened the law in 2003 to make it illegal for relatives to take young girls abroad for FGM - the first piece of UK legislation to include extra-territorial provisions.

Chris McCafferty was asked to speak at a working group session on institutional mechanisms. After the seminar, she said: "It was very important to relate our work in the UK to eradicate FGM to the work on this issue in Africa.

"The all party group looked into this issue because we were approached by groups who work on FGM in immigrant communities.

"These groups were on the hearings steering committee and also gave evidence - it was an issue led by people who had experience of FGM in the UK.

*"FGM still affects three million girls every year and an estimated 15,000 are at risk in the UK"*

"At the seminar, I welcomed the opportunity to talk to MPs from Africa and other parts of the world about how the new law to ban the practice in Britain could be of help to them. I also wanted to hear about their battle to change what is a long standing cultural practice in many parts of Africa.

"As UK parliamentarians, we have a duty to raise the issue of FGM at home and overseas and to work with colleagues abroad to ensure the target of eradicating FGM in a generation, is met."

The conference centred around two working groups, one on *Taking Action at the Community Level* - attended by Baroness Tonge - and another on *Institutional Mechanisms* - attended by Christine McCafferty MP.

Baroness Tonge said: "The key to eradicating FGM is education. I heard Mr Malick Diagne, Deputy Director of TOSTAN, talk about his programme to help eradicate FGM by visiting villages and giving workshops.

"TOSTAN, funded by UNICEF, is working to improve human rights in Senegal. It is deliberately broad based, rather than just focussing on FGM. The organisation has found that just talking about FGM causes great hostility.

"The programme works because it uses natural contacts in villages to spread the message as well as theatre, imams and local chiefs. The programme includes teaching on human rights, problem solving, and health issues such as hygiene, health, pre-natal care, vaccination, HIV/AIDS and FGM.

"TOSTAN encourages villages to declare publicly that FGM will not be practised in their area. So far, 1,628 communities in Senegal, around 32 per cent of the number practising FGM, have stopped it.

"I am very keen to talk to the Department for International Development about the way we could use TOSTAN methods in other African countries."

The conference was attended by representatives from the Metropolitan Police who are working with the immigrant community in the UK to try and eradicate the 'underground' practice of FGM. They were able to contact the Senegalese Police Force, about inter-agency working on this and other child protection issues.

The conference declaration reiterated the commitment of all countries present to eradicate FGM within one generation by:

- **developing** a multi-disciplinary and comprehensive approach
- **working** in the international and regional framework
- **creating** and enforcing legislation on FGM
- **allocating** resources to the eradication of FGM.

# Police action on FGM in London

A TEAM of officers from the Metropolitan Police Service's Child Abuse Investigation Command are taking action to prevent Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) being practised in London.

The Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 was enacted in March of 2004. The three officers in the team, led by Detective Chief Inspector Nigel Verrill, manage this work over and above their roles as child abuse investigators in their respective areas in West London.

Last November they won a National Diversity Award for their efforts at the 14<sup>th</sup> annual Jane's Police Review Gala Awards 2005 ceremony, collecting a £5,000 bursary.

The work on the FGM Project commenced in June of 2004. The first challenge was to identify a strategy to prevent this crime, which is prevalent in many African countries with communities in London.

The team decided to focus on the Somalian community, as they are well represented in London, and the mutilation is estimated at 98% prevalent in Somalia (source Amnesty International).

The challenge was to engage the diverse communities, many of whom do not speak English, and deliver some direct messages:

The practice of FGM is a crime in the UK (and carries a penalty of 14 years imprisonment), and those in the UK arranging for the act to take place in the UK or abroad also commit the offence.

FGM is physical and emotional torture of young pubescent girls. It carries serious health consequences which can result in AIDS, cysts, infections and in some cases death.

The team were determined that they would work in partnership with the community, taking a sensitive approach and raising awareness of the dangers and the illegality of the act. Their first task was to produce posters in English and Somali for distribution within the communities.

*Somali Human Hope* is a Somali Charity based in Streatham. Director Said Ahmad was quick to embrace the efforts of the FGM Project and has continued to work closely with the team.

Through Mr Ahmad, the team arranged a number of, what they termed as 'cultural lunches'. These took place at Somali restaurants where the officers informally met key members of the Somali Community, discussing the key messages and distributing leaflets.

Following the success of these meetings, the team arranged a community based conference, which was an all day event in Brixton, South London. The agenda for the day consisted of presentations from police and community leaders, a traditional Somali entertainer, a traditional lunch and a discussion forum, all of which was funded by the Metropolitan Police.

During the conference, DI Carol Hamilton gave live interviews on Somali radio stations. The event was a huge success with a strong

attendance and lively engagement.

The awareness campaign has now been piloted in schools in a West London borough where a joint letter by the Metropolitan Police and the Social Services was sent to every parent of a child of African ethnicity, advising them of the law, the penalties and the health risks. This was generally well received and opportunities for extending this are being considered.

Empowerment cards for families have been designed and are in production after which they will be distributed within the African communities.

The team continue to work with a range of key partners, in particular the charity *Forward*, attending conferences of professionals and community leaders delivering the key messages of the project – it's illegal and dangerous.

Two officers from the team,



*The Met's team: DCI Nigel Verrill, DI Carol Hamilton and DS Richard Green*

Detective Chief Inspector Nigel Verrill and Detective Sergeant Richard Green, attended a conference of Parliaments in Dakar, Senegal in December 2005 where a declaration was signed to eradicate FGM throughout Africa.

DCI Verrill said: "The conference was highly informative and our presence was welcomed by everyone we met.

"We were the only law enforcement agencies present and, following a presentation by Christine McCafferty MP, I had an opportunity to address the conference, updating them on our achievements in the UK.

"We are able to bring the strong messages from the conference to the African communities in London."

Detective Inspector Carol Hamilton said of the campaign: "This is a really rewarding piece of work and the eradication of FGM in London is our primary goal.

"We are working hard with the communities at achieving this. This is a crime of love. Parents who practice FGM believe their daughters won't have a life without it.

"Most people don't really want to do it. If we can empower them, they will stop it themselves."

The Head of the Child Abuse Investigation Command in London, Detective Chief Superintendent Peter Spindler, said: "This small team has produced some outstanding work on this project and will continue to progress this ground-breaking task.

"The main workstream on FGM will now be brought into the Child Abuse Investigation Command's *Project Violet* - a project addressing child abuse issues in communities."





## Mercosur: South America's EU



By Gordon Prentice MP who recently led a delegation to Uruguay and Argentina

**T**HE South American Common Market, *Mercosur*, briefly hit the headlines in December when it was announced that oil-rich Venezuela, under its colourful and controversial President, Hugo Chavez, was to join the club.

What would it mean? Few, including the British Government, seemed to know.

*Mercosur* is the world's fourth largest regional trading bloc whose four core members - Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay (leaving aside the two associate members - Chile and Bolivia) have a combined population of 256 million.

It produces more than £560 billion annually in goods and services. Big enough to make a difference but there is a feeling that it has never really punched its weight.

With Venezuela on board this may change. And Vicente Fox, the President of Mexico, already a member of the North American Free Trade Area, has dropped hints he too may be interested in joining.

A new hemispheric free trade area from the Baffin Bay to Tierra del Fuego was on the agenda last November when President Bush went to Mar del Plata in Argentina for a two-day summit meeting of the leaders of 34 Western Hemisphere nations.

This was immediately denounced by Chavez

speaking at a parallel summit as an "annexationist plan". With huge protesting crowds thronging the streets of the seaside resort, encouraged by the iconic Argentinian soccer legend Diego Maradona, the real summit dissolved without agreement.

*Mercosur* was set up in 1991 and is work in progress. Tariffs apply to 30 per cent of goods traded within the "common market" and nationals travelling from one country to another still have to fill in forms, something that now seems quaint for those of us used to being waved through the borders of EU states.

The administrative heart of the organisation is in the Uruguayan capital, Montevideo, in a converted luxury hotel, complete with grand ballroom and sweeping staircase, dating from the turn of the last century.

Inside, looking out on to the River Plate, there sits a staff of 24. Comparisons with the European Commission, housed in its glass citadel in Brussels and with a staff of 25,000, are therefore wholly misplaced.

That said, there are many in the region who have bigger ambitions for *Mercosur*. There is talk of it having its own parliament, initially nominated and advisory but eventually directly elected. But that is some way down the road.

The most pressing issue of the moment, is getting a fair deal for their agriculture commodities. The countries of the South American cone are huge primary producers and want access to the EU market, free of quotas and tariffs. The outcome of the WTO Ministerial meeting in Hong Kong in December, despite the heroic efforts of the UK to get an agreement, was therefore a big disappointment.

The UK's position as a leading champion of trade liberalisation within the EU is widely recognised and applauded although some doubts are expressed.

Traceability, so important to us following the animal health horror stories of BSE and foot and mouth, is seen by some influential opinion formers as just another sophisticated non tariff barrier designed to exclude prime South American beef. Not so.

The arguments on market access and liberalisation cut both ways, and the EU has been pressing many countries in the developing world for more rigorous protection of intellectual property rights. In Argentina, over 98 per cent of soya bean exports are GM and Monsanto, after taking no action for years, now wants to start charging royalties. The Argentinians are resisting this and the parties are locked in dispute.

*Mercosur* is, of course, potentially much more than a trading bloc. It could lead to much closer integration of the economies of member states and, distant though it must seem, some form of political integration.

The priority for MPs on the Uruguayan Parliamentary Committee on *Mercosur* is to speed up this integration by introducing a common travel area and getting major new infrastructure projects off the ground. And they want to tackle energy issues.

There is talk of a new gas pipeline from Venezuela to Argentina. Already Chavez offers oil at a discount.

A new Structural Convergence Fund, set up just over a year ago, is designed to finance the building of

*"There are many in the region who have bigger ambitions for Mercosur"*

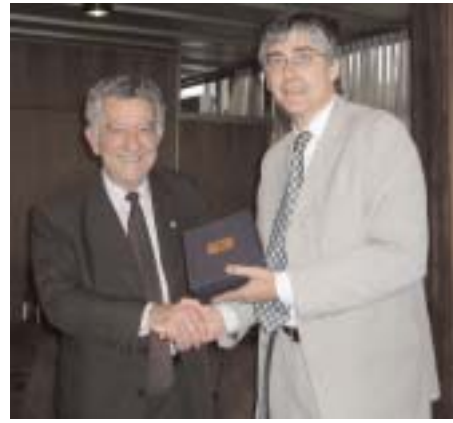
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roads and bridges and improve communications in the smaller states of Uruguay and Paraguay. Brazil and Argentina will be net contributors.

It is one way of addressing the huge asymmetries in population and market sizes and the problems these cause.

For Brazil, the population of the rest of the regional bloc is only 0.3 times its own. But, for Uruguay, the rest of *Mercosur* has a population 64 times greater than its own.

In an echo of the EU, the countries of *Mercosur* are hesitantly building a wider and deeper union. It will take time.



Gordon Prentice MP with Uruguay's Foreign Minister

## Curing Colombia's addiction to drugs and violence

By David Kemp

A LEADING Colombian politician has given a grim warning that the fight against the country's cocaine traffickers could not be won – unless international action is taken to end the demand for drugs.

Mr Carlos Albornoz - first Vice-President of Colombia's Senate – said: "My opinion, supported by the results of the fight against drugs, is that this is a battle we have lost.

"I don't see how we can win it really. Despite all the efforts, Colombia and the rest of the international community have made to combat drugs, every day we are seeing more cocaine production and more cocaine consumption."

Mr Albornoz, who was leading a delegation from the South American state as guests of the British Group IPU, stressed that this was not an official view but only a personal opinion.

He said that in areas where measures had been successful to eradicate coca production, the drug producers had moved to another part of the country.

"While we still have this high demand in the rest of the world for drugs, there is always going to be somebody in Colombia growing them," he said. "One day, god willing, production will end. But I can guarantee that it will just move to another country."

Mr Albornoz understood the concern of countries with youngsters addicted to drugs "and are living in hell", but Colombia was suffering a "high price" for the huge demand for drugs including the murder of political leaders, police and judges.



The Speaker Michael Martin MP with Senator Carlos Albornoz and Senator Luis Ramos of Colombia

And despite American aid for *Plan Colombia* to combat the drugs trade, his government has had to divert funds from key services like health and education.

Bob Spink MP, who chaired the recent round table talks at Westminster, described the warning as "a bit of a counsel of despair."

But another MP didn't agree that the dispersal of drugs production had had no impact especially

*"I fear that Colombians will live through a very turbulent period in the run up to the presidential elections"*

in Europe. He said the volume and quality of cocaine had not increased as had been predicted five years ago, and this had also had an impact on addiction.

The MPs and Peers were given a progress report on the Colombian Government's deadly struggle with insurgents – such as the largest group called FARC - which has grown rich and powerful by taking control of the drugs trade. And a lot of money was made out of kidnapping and extortion.

They were told that there were about 30,000 armed guerrillas and about 20,000 paramilitaries.

Last June the Government – headed by President Uribe – brought in a controversial new Peace and Justice Law aimed at persuading insurgents to disarm and demobilise. The measures include protection from extradition to the USA for drugs crimes if they handed in their weapons and left the insurgents.

Mr Ramos said that 11,000 paramilitaries had demobilised and another 8,000 were expected to lay down their arms.

He said that recently, he met one of the heads of the second largest left wing rebel group, the National Liberation Army, and said there was a good opportunity to make "some serious progress for peace."

Mr Albornoz said that President Uribe had restored public order in the majority of municipalities in

Colombia. "But the problem has not ended," he added. "We have not reached peace at all. We are most probably quite far from achieving peace but people feel there is much more security than there was three years ago."

Mr Albornoz forecast that the run up to the presidential elections this May could be "a very turbulent period."

"I am sure FARC will increase their belligerent actions in the next few months because of the possibility that Uribe will be re-elected."

Congress has passed a law enabling President Uribe, who took office in 2002, to stand for a second term.

*Please turn over the page*

*Continued from previous page*

He was popular because he had “put a brake on the insurgents.”

Mr Alborno said that in the last few years, there had been speculation about Venezuelan influence on FARC.

It has been said that FARC insurgents had sought refuge in the neighbouring state, had received Venezuelan citizenship and that they had been trained there with the approval of the Venezuelan authorities.

“That is a destabilising factor for Colombia,” he said.

## Kiddie contract killers

THE plight of street children recruited to become guerrillas and assassins was highlighted at the meeting.

Delegation leader Carlos Alborno said: “There are children who make up the contract killers groups in Colombia – boys who risk their lives just to work for the drug traffickers.”

Guerrilla groups were maintained by “forced recruitment”. Rural families with, for example, four children were made to send two of the youngsters to form “their rank and file.”

Paramilitaries generally recruited youngsters over the age of 15 and paid them about 400 to 500 dollars a month. Many others between 14 and 15 years of age were snatched by insurgents and paid nothing.

Mr Alborno said that this was a consequence of “extreme poverty” and the fact that many single mothers and fathers behave irresponsibly. The Government, and an institution called the Colombian Welfare Association, were trying to tackle the problem.

The delegates were grilled about human rights and the killing of politicians, journalists, and politicians.

Fellow delegate Luis Ramos said that people from all walks of life had been victims of violence.

But he revealed that there had been a drop in the number of trade unionists killed from 184 in 2001 to 35 last year.

# Elections loom in Costa Rica and

*LATE last year, Peter Kilfoyle MP led the first ever delegation from the British Group IPU to Costa Rica and Nicaragua. On these two pages, he and another member of the group, Charlotte Atkins MP, give their impressions of these two key countries in South America*



**By Peter Kilfoyle MP**

TWO themes were constant within Costa Rica. The first was a restlessness with heavy-handed American activity and

rhetoric within their country. The second was the omnipresent allegations of corruption amongst the Costa Rican political class.

President Pacheco had had two of his predecessors indicted on corruption charges; a third former president would not return to Costa Rica because of the fear that he, too, would be charged.

Whilst in Costa Rica, cross-border tension was inflamed by a long-standing border dispute over the San Juan River which separates Costa Rica from Nicaragua. The Costa Ricans referred the issue to the International Court of Justice in The Hague. This set the initial tone for our visit to Nicaragua.

On the first day of our visit, we met President Bolanos. He, too, had acted on corruption allegations, but, in turn, his government was mired in similar charges. As we arrived, he – or, rather, his legislature – was threatening retaliatory economic sanctions on Costa Rica.

As in Costa Rica, concern over corruption was matched only by an all-pervading resentment of American rhetoric over proposed constitutional changes.

There is cause for concern at the intrusion of these changes into fair elections. Yet all parties from the left to the right were keen to have European Union election observers in place long before next year’s elections. These were preferred to those on offer from the Organisation of American States.

Our schedule again included meetings with all of the principal politicians, in both the government and the legislature. These two bodies are in undeclared war with each other in a most odd way. For example, the President’s own party – the right wing Liberals – are in alliance with the revolutionary Sandinistas in the legislature, to bring the sitting President down, and to release the former president, Aleman, from custody on corruption convictions! What is obviously needed is our experience of good government.

We also visited the Nicaraguan municipalities of Masaya and Granada (claimed as the oldest town in Latin America). The former was visited during its hectic feast day of its patron saint, St Jerome – a rare opportu-



*Peter Kilfoyle MP and other members of the delegation with President Bolanos of Nicaragua*

# in Nicaragua

nity to join in with the ordinary people and their culture.

It was a most revealing trip; and, hopefully, we imparted some British good sense into a fraught situation in both countries. There is great respect for our traditions and our political probity. Our greatest export to them would be a political culture free of corruption.

Foolishly, the Foreign Office has withdrawn embassies from Central America and elsewhere.

But I believe that – after a gap of three decades – we have reopened a dialogue with two parliaments who badly need to draw on our experience.

I just hope that the mechanisms will be put in place to ensure that that is done, to our mutual benefit.



**By Charlotte Atkins MP**

WITH both countries facing elections within

the next 13 months; it was a crucial time to visit Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

Our delegation was given an insight into the strengths and challenges faced by both countries and the tensions caused by a dispute over the San Juan River and 500,000 illegal Nicaraguan immigrants working in Costa Rica.

In Costa Rica, we were particularly privileged to meet president Dr Abel Pacheco and Dr Oscar Arias Sanchez, ex-President and Nobel Peace Winner - and the front runner as the next President.

This gave us a marvellous opportunity to understand the political and economic situation in Costa Rica at a crucial time in the run up to Presidential and Parliamentary elections next February.

Sadly, both major parties, Dr Pacheco's Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC) and Dr Arias' National Liberation Party (PLN) have been rocked by corruption.

Two former PUSC Presidents are currently under house arrest awaiting charges for alleged corruption while in office, and former PLN President Figueres can't return to Costa Rica for fear of a similar fate. President Pacheco

has been prepared to bring these corruption scandals out into the open despite the embarrassment. But it has left the image of politicians at a low ebb.

We had hoped to discuss these issues of standards in public office and the proper scrutiny of ministers and officials with members of the legislative Assembly but sadly the only disappointment of the visit was the failure of Costa Rican deputies to debate these crucial issues with us.

The current Assembly has a poor record of passing legislation and has limited powers to scrutinise government decisions, probably not helped by the inexperience of deputies who are elected for four years and cannot return until after a rest period.

As a result, less than ten per cent of parliamentarians return to

cent provide balanced nutritional meals for pupils, with three meals a day for some of the most needy.

Costa Rica offers ten years of schooling which is good for Latin America but the drop out rate is high and schools are deteriorating through lack of investment. The gap between the rich and poor is demonstrated by the growth in the private education sector.

Costa Rica remains a macho society. An impressive 35 per cent of the Legislative Assembly is made up of women. But domestic violence is on the increase, and despite an equal pay code women can expect to earn 25 per cent less even in the finance sector.

With the age of consent only 12, Costa Rica has a problem with the sexual exploitation of minors and is at risk of becoming a destination for sex tourism.



*The delegation with President Abel Pacheco of Costa Rica*

the Legislative Assembly, for a second term.

Costa Rica is the smallest country in Central America in terms of population but is the most affluent on a GDP per capital basis. Yet around 20 per cent live in poverty and this is likely to rise as the President cannot push through his reform programme, for instance on fiscal measures, due to a lack of legislative majority.

However, there is free health care and education. We saw an impressive children's hospital in San Jose performing state-of-the-art liver and other organ transplants. Health is a high priority which has helped create an infant mortality rate of under 10 per 1000 - better than in some US states.

The focus on health is carried through into schools where 98 per

There is huge potential in Costa Rica both in terms of tourism which already generates three billion dollars with an impressive 25 per cent of the country protected as a National Park or reserve and in terms of its environment and its natural resources. Over 90 per cent of its power is internally generated making it both efficient and cheap.

But the challenges are immense:

- **The urgent** need for effective political leadership

- **The opening** up of state monopolies for instance in telecommunications while still maintaining control of the core services

- **The development** of international trade which is a key engine of growth via the Central American free trade agreement while protecting the poor from its effects.

# The Mexican wave



**Andrew Love MP**  
Chair, all party Group  
on Mexico

MEXICO's emergence on the world stage has in recent years been anything but smooth. And there are signs that this is likely to continue.

The current divisions over the future direction of the country may not be resolved in the presidential and parliamentary elections later this year. And the steady if unspectacular growth of the economy seems to have stalled as a result of the failure to modernise the country's infrastructure.

It was against that backdrop that all party group delegation visited at the end of last year. High on the agenda were meetings at the Senate and Chamber of Deputies to help strengthen parliamentary and political ties.

Recognising that bi-lateral trade and investment have increased significantly in recent years, a meeting with the Parliamentary Commission on the Economy was also arranged.

Today the Mexican economy has

## Fact file: Mexico

**Area:** 1,964,375 sq km, of which 1,959,248 sq km are continental and 5,127 sq km are islands.

**Population:** 105 million

**Capital City:** Mexico City

**People:** The people of Mexico are a mixture of descendants from Spanish and other immigrants, mainly Europeans, who settled in Mexico from the sixteenth century onwards, and mestizos - mixed European and indigenous ancestry, as well as the many indigenous groups.

**Languages:** The official language is Spanish. There are at least 62 indigenous languages.

**Religions:** Roman Catholic 89%, Protestant 6%, 5% other denomination

**Currency:** Mexican Peso, divided into 100 centavos

**Political Parties:** Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI); Partido Accion Nacional (PAN); Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD)

**Government:** A federal republic of 31 states and the Federal District of Mexico with powers separated into three branches: President, Congress and Supreme Court.

**Head of State:** President Vicente Fox Quesada



*Andy Love and other members of the delegation with Senator Jeffrey Max Jones-Jones in the Mexican Senate*

recovered from the severe currency devaluation of ten years ago. That's a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which has proved to be an engine of economic growth in recent years. So has the development of free trade internationally.

Since joining the GATT in 1986, Mexico has become the 7<sup>th</sup> largest importer and 8<sup>th</sup> largest exporter worldwide. Its free trade agreement with the EU opens significant opportunities for trade and investment as tariffs are eliminated over the next few years.

The delegation also found time to pursue a wider range of issues including poverty, rural development, migration and human rights.

Lively discussions were held with the relevant parliamentary commissions and augmented in meetings with interested NGOs and academic institutes.

Regional disparities in wealth are growing. Highlighted some years ago in the protests of the "Zapatista" movement, this is at its most extreme in the Chiapas region in the rural south.

Although steps have been taken to address the neglect and indifference of the past, it is widely recognised that more needs to be done if real change is to be made to the lives of the rural poor - or to stem the flood of migrants to the north.

Whilst attempts have been made to promote change - economic reform and modernisation have stalled. Government revenues are stuck at around 12 per cent of GDP, the lowest in the developed world. Efforts to increase the tax take have been thwarted which has

meant that much needed investment in infrastructure and education cannot take place.

Concerted government action is a necessary pre-condition to ending the isolation and deprivation that exists in many regions.

Along the border with the US, the problems are of a different order and are in many ways a consequence of the rapid industrialisation of recent years.

Thanks to the NAFTA, jobs and living standards have grown significantly. But so has illegal immigration and hard drugs, fuelling the black economy of the region.

As a result, traditional family and community relationships have come under significant pressure leading to a dramatic increase in random violence especially against women.

The delegation met representatives from human rights organisations and heard the harrowing testimony of the women and families directly affected.

Mexico has made significant progress in recent years.

The challenge, in this an election year, is for the country to recognise that it will take nothing less than a break with the past to realise their ambition to become the major political and economic force in Latin America.



# Democracy in the land of Genghis Khan

*JOHN Grogan MP, Chair of the all party Mongolia Group, went to the former Soviet state last year as an observer at a key by-election which paved the way for the winning candidate to become Prime Minister within a few months. Here is his informative account of what he saw in this emerging democracy.*



BY any measure, Mongolia has completed the transition from single-party Communist rule to a thriving multi-party democracy with an ease unrivalled across the central-Asian landmass.

Since the first democratic parliamentary elections took place in 1992 - incidentally with a massive 95.6 per cent turn-out - power has shifted back and forward at the three subsequent elections, between the now reformed and reconstructed former Communists - the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) and a shifting coalition of centre-right parties.

This culminated in the General Election of May 2004 which saw a dead heat between the MPRP and a resurgent coalition gathered under the title of the Motherland Democratic Coalition (MDC).

With a stoicism and practicality which characterises the Mongolian people a power-sharing agreement was reached between the two parties for the duration of the four-

year parliament whereby the MPRP would agree to hand over the reigns of power to the MDC for two years until they themselves reclaimed power in 2006.

The delicate balance of power in Mongolia was threatened, though, when the leader of the MPRP, former Prime Minister N. Enkhbayar, won the presidential election in June 2004, forcing him to relinquish his parliamentary seat in the 65<sup>th</sup> electoral district in Bayangol, Ulaanbaatar.

This was therefore no ordinary by-election. Despite the previous power-sharing agreement brokered following the General Election of 2004, the loss of this seat would make the MPRP a minority partner in the coalition.

There was much interest in the by-election, with the MPRP putting forward a prominent candidate, the City Mayor of Ulaanbaatar, M.Enkhbold.

However, shortly before the by-election, the Democratic Party withdrew their candidate, Prime Minister T.Elbegdorj (the Premiership does not require an elected politician in Mongolia), in order to avert what had seemed to be a looming crisis over the future of the Coalition Government.

This act served to reaffirm both parties' commitment to the coalition continuing until parliamentary elections are due in 2008.

The by-election took place in good weather conditions leading to hopes of a high turn-out. The constituency was on the outskirts of the city - an amalgam of soviet-era tower blocks and shacks constructed precariously at the foot of hills surrounding Ulaanbaatar.

Campaigning was conducted through door-to-door contact and leaflet delivery, with campaigning centres being established through the erection of traditional Mongolian nomadic tents - Ghers. The thriving culture of robust political debate is nowhere better demonstrated than at election time.

As an international electoral observer, I visited three polling stations. At each, the voter was greeted by officials from the independent Central Electoral Commis-

sion, who requested a state identification card from each individual before issuing voting papers. After voting, the thumb of the individual was stained with indelible ink to prevent repeat voting.

All of this was observed from the rear of the polling station by observers acting on behalf of each of the candidates.

One concern which I and other international observers raised was the rather low level of the screens surrounding the polling booths. This was soon amended by the General Election Commission to allay any privacy fears.

The level of scrutiny inside the polling booth, coupled with the demand for official photographic identification and the staining of each voter with ink did lead me to conclude that in some ways the organisation of polling day is more stringent than in the UK.

As was widely predicted, M. Enkhbold scored a clear victory taking 77.18 per cent with his nearest challenger D.Jargalsaikhan of the Civil Will Republican Party, trailing with 9.49 per cent.

The turn-out of 64.11 per cent was judged to be disappointing in many official quarters, although, by comparison, in the recent by-election in Livingston only 38.6 per cent of the electorate voted.

The Chairman of the General Election Commission declared the following day that there were no breaches or illegal acts during the poll and none of the candidates complained. This was certainly the conclusion I also reached.

In a short time, Mongolia has risen as a democratic beacon shining across central-Asia.

And despite recent political turmoil which has led to Mr Enkhbold becoming Prime Minister, it is a model which many of its near neighbours would do well to replicate.

## Fact file: Mongolia

**Area:** 602,829 sq miles

**Population:** 2.5million

**Capital City:** Ulaanbaatar

**People:** 86% Khalkh Mongols, Kazakhs (6%), 8% other

**Languages:** Khalkh Mongol, Kazakh

**Religions:** Tibetan Buddhism,

Shamanism, Muslim (in south-west)

**Currency:** Togrog (MNT)

**Political parties:** Mongolia boasts 18 parties - principally the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP), Mongolian Democratic Party (DP), Mongolian Civil Will and Republican Party (CWRP). The CWRP, DP and the New Socialist Democratic Party formed the Motherland-Democracy Coalitions to contest the 2004 General Election.

**Government:** Supreme legislative power vested in the 76 - member Ikh Hural, elected for four years.

**President:** Nambaryn Enkhbayar

**Prime Minister:** M. Enkhbold



Continued from page 5

advantage of extremists is that they are usually in a better position to deliver.

Of course the problems of the Middle East could become worse before they start to improve. Much will depend upon the attitude of Israel - the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians by Jews in Hebron which I saw on polling day is not immediately encouraging.

What are 200 Jews doing in the centre of a city of over 100,000 Arabs? It would be like 200 IRA men being housed in the centre of Belfast or 200 Orangemen in the centre of Dublin!

Then there is the approach by Hamas to Israel. Just like Northern Ireland, the IRA terrorists could not win and eventually they recognised this. Likewise Hamas cannot win but it can continue to cause much suffering to Israelis and Palestinians alike.

When it is accepted that there can be no armed victory then real politics commence - and that means that Hamas must eventually reach an accommodation with Israel.

But the main problem remains the role of the USA, which due to its Jewish lobby, has not shown the impartiality that is necessary. For real progress that is essential.

The most immediate challenge — due to Hamas' failure to recognise Israel and the refusal of the USA and Israel to talk to Hamas - is to avoid the total collapse of society in Palestine.

The economy is already in crisis. There are only sufficient funds for a further month to pay police, teachers etc.

If there is not to be a decline into increased violence a way must be found around the present problems of funding the Palestinian Authority. Surely it is not in the interests of democracy to starve the Palestinians and force them into the clutches of such undemocratic regimes as in Iran and Syria.

Democracy in the USA and Europe has a major challenge in the Middle East after this Hamas victory. I hope the West can rise to the challenge.

We did in Northern Ireland - and I still am optimistic that it is not impossible in the Middle East.



*MEMBERS of a delegation from the all party group on Bolivia – led by Lord Lea of Crondall – receiving a warm welcome last year in the South American state.*

*During the visit, they met the outgoing president, Eduardo Rodriguez, and discussed the country's oil and gas production. UK companies – mainly British Gas and BP – have a billion dollars invested in the industry.*

*Since the visit, a new leader has been elected - Evo Morales – Bolivia's first indigenous president. A charismatic figure - famous for his striped jumpers - the former head of a coca farmers union is a fierce critic of the USA and has pledged to "recover" the country's natural resources.*

## Quick Quiz

1. Chinese New Year took place on 29 January - 2006 is the year of which animal?
2. Mexico has borders with which three other countries?
3. What is the capital city of Gabon?
4. Which three countries are both members of the Commonwealth and the European Union?
5. Who is President of the EU Commission?
6. Which country recently hosted the Africa Cup of Nations?

## Quiz Answers

1. Dog; 2. USA, Guatemala and Belize; 3. Libreville; 4. United Kingdom, Cyprus and Malta; 5. Jose Manuel Barroso; 6. Egypt

## Come and join us!

MEMBERS of the British Group of the IPU invite all newly-elected MPs to join them.

Those interested in taking part in the Group's activities should telephone the secretariat on 7219 3011, visit our Website - [www.bgipu.org](http://www.bgipu.org) - or write to:

**Kenneth Courtenay**  
**General Secretary**  
**British Group IPU**  
**Palace of Westminster**  
**London, SW1A 0AA**



*A delegation from Bahrain led by Mr Abdul Rahman Mohamed Jamsheer with members of the British Group and Government spokesperson in the Lords for the Foreign Office, Baroness Royall*

## Diary

THE British Group plans to send delegations to Guatemala and El Salvador in June - and to Azerbaijan and Mexico later this year.

WE hope to welcome visitors from the Republic of Korea in May, and from Iceland and the United Arab Emirates in the summer.

A MEETING of members of parliamentary human rights bodies will be held in Geneva in June.





Last December, Senegal hosted a parliamentary conference on female genital mutilation (FGM) in Dakar.

Nearly 200 participants discussed this inhumane practice that is still widespread in many African societies.

There was a real need to bring African parliamentarians together, to enable them to exchange ideas and support each other in their commitment to the abandonment of female genital mutilation.

It's a practice that is detrimental to women's health and an offence against their human rights.

FGM still affects three million girls every year, and 100 to 140 million women and girls around the world have undergone some form of it. In the UK, it is estimated that 15,000 girls are at risk.

The conference aimed to inform MPs about progress towards eradicating FGM and the future challenges still to be faced. There were also workshops to discuss mechanisms for eliminating FGM, through legislation, enforcement, advocacies and local mechanisms.

Chris McCafferty MP and Baroness Tonge were selected to take part in the seminar which was organised by the IPU.

As Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health, Chris McCafferty chaired the Group's hearings on FGM in November 2000. Baroness Tonge also participated in the hearings as a member of the APPG and has spoken on this issue many times in Parliament.

Britain tightened the law in 2003 to make it illegal for relatives to take young girls abroad for FGM - the first piece of UK legislation to include extra-territorial provisions.

Chris McCafferty was asked to speak at a working group session on institutional mechanisms.

After the seminar, Chris said: "It was very important to relate our work in the UK to eradicate FGM to the work on this issue in Africa.

"The all party group looked into this issue because we were approached by groups who work on FGM in immigrant communities.

"These groups were on the hearings steering committee and also

gave evidence - it was an issue led by people who had experience of FGM in the UK.

"At the seminar, I welcomed the opportunity to talk to MPs from Africa and other parts of the world about how the new law to ban the practice in Britain could be of help to them.

"I also wanted to hear about their battle to change what is a long standing cultural practice in many parts of Africa.

"As UK parliamentarians, we have a duty to raise the issue of FGM at home and abroad and to work with colleagues in other countries to ensure that the target of eradicating FGM in a generation, is met."

The conference centred around two working groups, one on *Taking Action at the Community Level* - attended by Baroness Tonge - and another on *Institutional Mechanisms* - attended by Christine McCafferty MP.

Baroness Tonge said: "The key to eradicating FGM is education. I heard Mr Malick Diaghe, Deputy Director of *TOSTAN*, talk about his programme to help eradicate FGM by visiting villages and giving workshops.

"*TOSTAN* is funded by UNICEF and is working to improve human rights in Senegal. It is deliberately broad based, rather than just focussing on FGM. The organisation has found that just talking about FGM causes great hostility.

"The programme works because it uses natural contacts in villages to spread the message as well as theatre, imams and local chiefs. The programme includes teaching on human rights and problem solving, as well as health issues including hygiene, health, prenatal care, vaccination, HIV/AIDS and FGM.

"*TOSTAN* encourages villages to make a public declaration that FGM will not be practised in their village. So far, 1,628 communities in Senegal, around 32 per cent of the number practising FGM, have stopped FGM.

"I am very keen to talk to the Department for International Development about the way we could use *TOSTAN* methods in other African countries."

The conference was also attended by representatives from the Metropolitan Police who are working with the immigrant community in the UK to try and eradicate the 'underground' practise of FGM.

They were able to make contact with the Senegalese Police Force, about inter-agency working on this and other child protection issues.

The conference declaration reiterated the commitment of all countries present to eradicate FGM within one generation by:

- **developing** a multidisciplinary and comprehensive approach
- **working** in the international and regional framework
- **creating** and enforcing legislation on FGM
- **allocating** resources to the eradication of FGM.





ANYWHERE else in the world they would call it ethnic cleansing.

Make it inconvenient for those who live outside the city to work within it through the selective use of road blocks and they will take their labour elsewhere.

Surround their village with a guarded wall so it is accessible only by foot and the population will eventually move out.

Use a concrete barrier to separate farmers from their fields, families from their loved ones and children from their schools and they too will go.

Harass the locals by declaring that new roads are inaccessible to them because of their race and block off access to their very homes with concrete blocks.

In this environment, the outcome of the recent Palestinian election is of little surprise. All these and more are the tactics of the Israeli occupying army in the West Bank. East Jerusalem, a city holy to Christians, Jews and Muslims is already in places a no-go area for Palestinians.

Yet it is the source (until recently) of over 40 per cent of Palestine's earned income.

Surely no policy of using armed troops to maintain 680 road blocks daily in someone else's tiny country can be justified or tolerated? Over half of the 680km so-called 'defensive' wall is now complete.

Building continues despite the ruling of the International Courts. 80 per cent of its planned length is inside Palestinian territory (rather than on the border) and nearly ten per cent of Palestine is on the 'wrong' side of the Wall, including some of the most productive aquifers in the region and some of Palestine's most fertile land, near Bethlehem.

The pre-1967 border between Israel and the West Bank is the basis of the Road Map, the best available option for establishing two separate, sovereign and viable states, as envisaged by the 1948 partition.

Yet in places the grabbing fingers of this massive concrete edifice will stretch 20km inside Palestinian territory at a cost greater than the Palestinian

Authority has to run its country for a year.

Israeli soldiers do not stand idly by their roadblocks. Israel holds nearly 9,000 political detainees, most of whom were arrested on Palestinian territory and then jailed in Israel in breach of international conventions.

Lawyers tell us that almost 300 are children and that 650 are being held without charge.

So why is Israel suffocating and strangling its weaker neighbour? What does it have to gain?

It is not security. The threat from individual bombers was diminishing even before construction started and its progress coincides with a protracted ceasefire from Hamas.

With Israel to the west and the occupied Jordan Valley to the east, the 'safe' transit routes and ribbon development already look like the rungs of a ladder, dividing Palestine into ever smaller units with little or no communication between them.

Economic and social planning become impossible for the fledgling Palestinian democracy and the Road Map's dependence on a viable West Bank is called into question.

The country is taking on a 'Swiss cheese' appearance with local control only of the holes within an Israeli-controlled infrastructure.

The leadership of the Fatah movement, recently in government, is intelligent, responsible and multi-ethnic: some senior members are not Muslims but Christians.

But it is weak, poor, frustrated. They had little to show for years of abdicating the bullet and the bomb, though I sense little desire to return to former days.

Fatah was always going to be vulnerable in the general election, and the result is potentially destabilising to the peace process.

If there is a resurgence of terrorism, Israel will say that they were right to be cautious and that their clampdown on the West Bank was justified.

If there is no such resurgence, they will claim that their suppression has worked. Catch 22.

The political equations are not looking good. After several years of

occupied pseudo-independence, the Palestinian Authority could demonstrate too few meaningful outcomes to its electorate in the run-up to the recent election.

Even if Palestinians have done better being in government than out of it, Israel's use of roadblocks, no-go areas and general harassment made it impossible for the Palestinian Authority to govern or the economy to bloom.

It is little wonder that ordinary people looked elsewhere – to Hamas, the voice of desperation – for electoral solace.

The first-ever delegation from the British Group of the IPU to the Palestine National Authority took place in November.

It was, we hope, useful for our hosts, who went to enormous trouble both to make us welcome and to provide a full programme for us.

For the British MPs and Peers, particularly those to whom the Palestinian territories were a new experience, it was far more - a lesson in how to try to live in a territory under a military occupation.

So, of course, there were the formal meetings (plus lunches and dinners) with Palestinian ministers and other dignitaries at which there was copious discussion. These, however, were as much instructive for the circumstances in which they took place as for what was said.

The meeting in Ramallah with our own Mr Speaker's counterpart, Mr Rawhi Fattouh, was held very shortly after Mr Fattouh's brother had been murdered in a terrorist attack in Amman, Jordan.

The meeting with Mr Salah Tamari, the Governor of Bethlehem, was held just as the Israelis had imposed a new barrier which made it almost impossible for Bethlehem to function as a living town.

Our visit to the ancient city of Hebron was memorable for, among many other incidents, our having to bribe our way out if we were not to spend the night as unwilling guests of the Hebron Palestinians and virtual prisoners of the Israeli occupying forces.

A visit to Tulkarm almost did not take place at all because Israeli troops controlling the checkpoint at the entry at first were unwilling to allow us to enter - for the Kafkaesque reason that our minibus had Israeli licence-plates.

Indeed, though they might not have known it - and might not have cared if they had - the troops were in a sense our instructive hosts in making this delegation not simply a worthwhile exchange of courtesies and information but a lesson in Israeli policy.

We might have regretted the minimum of facilities that the British Consulate-General could provide for this Palestinian-hosted visit (though they did give us a dinner at which we met several

informative Palestinians) if it were not that the absence of diplomatic protection at checkpoints (of which there are more than 600) gave us a taste of what life is like under stringent occupation.

As I pointed out to my colleagues, the harassment to which we were subjected - including the invasion of our minibus by an ostentatiously armed Israeli soldier and our being held at gun-point by Israeli soldiers in Hebron - was as nothing compared to the obstructions which make daily life certainly miserable and in many ways intolerable for Palestinians. And we were going home on Friday while the Palestinians were stuck there permanently.

The rude and arrogant questioning to which we were subjected at Tel-Aviv airport when we were seeking to leave did at least end in our getting on a plane and coming back to Westminster, whereas Palestinians are staggeringly lucky if they are able to travel at all. Back at Westminster, we reported back to fellow-IPU members, instigated debates in Westminster Hall and in the House of Lords and put questions to the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary.

The IPU staff had worked wonders in arranging a programme in a location where it is almost a Biblical miracle to turn up on time.

Kenneth Courtenay, the BGIPU's General Secretary, who accompanied us and had to share all our tribulations - as well as put up with us - was the model of urbanity and efficiency.

While we were in the territories, we heard much of preparations for the Palestinians' first elections for ten years. That even the victors of the elections, Hamas, conformed to the norms of electoral orthodoxy was living tribute to the Westminster model, of which the IPU is the exemplar.

Palestine is the home of the three great monotheistic religions, and our delegation not only had the opportunity of visiting the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem - sadly forlorn in its lack of pilgrims due to restrictions on access - and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, in an Old City almost

denuded of visitors.

We visited, too, the great Muslim shrines, including the Dome of the Rock, from which the prophet Mohammed ascended, and the El-Aqsa Mosque and, nearby, the surviving Western Wall of the Israelites' Jewish temple.

We also saw, at Tulkarm and elsewhere, the hideous separation wall being built by today's Israelis.

In this strife-torn Holy Land, we learned, paradoxes do not have to be invented. They are part of the eternal landscape.

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