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Your ref: Funding for organisations in Gaza

09/04/2024

Dear Stephen,

I am writing in reply to your letter to the First Minister of 12th March relating to the Scottish Government's contribution to the UNRWA Flash Appeal in November 2023.

The initial contribution of £500,000 was recommended by officials to be provided to UNRWA as the only organisation with the operational capacity for providing aid at scale in Gaza.

In relation to the additional £250,000, officials did initially scope options and submitted advice focusing on water supply at the request of Ministers. However, it became clear through discussions with a number of humanitarian organisations which all stressed the importance of flexibility in providing humanitarian support according to changing needs on the ground, that it would be preferable that any contribution from the Scottish Government be unrestricted to a specific sector such as water. UNRWA was the organisation best placed to make most effective use of unrestricted aid in the Gaza Strip. Updated advice was therefore submitted to my predecessor's office setting out three options, with a recommendation that UNRWA be the recipient of the additional contribution if that contribution was to be unrestricted. My predecessor agreed with that recommendation.

It is therefore simply untrue to claim, as you did, that officials' advice was ignored.

You asked what steps were taken to gain assurance that UNRWA was a suitable organisation which presented no risk of misuse of funds and whether advice was sought from the FCDO.

On 13 October, Scottish Government officials first contacted officials in the FCDO to advise them of the possibility of a Scottish Government humanitarian contribution to UNRWA.

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FCDO officials informed them on 16 October that the UK Government had announced that day £10 million in humanitarian aid, including a contribution to UNRWA, for civilians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. On 23 October, the UK Government announced a further £20m contribution to humanitarian agencies, including UNRWA.

In addition to this implicit assurance from the UK Government, prior to transferring funding to UNRWA, and as part of wider due diligence checks, Scottish Government officials, with support from external legal advisors, separately scrutinised the organisation's regulatory framework which governs UNRWA's financial management and staff conduct.

Given the facts set out above, particularly in relation to the UK Government's contributions to UNRWA, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that your purported concerns and line of questioning in this regard is little more than a bad faith misrepresentation of the Scottish Government's actions.

You also asked whether advice was sought from finance officials on the contribution and its impact on the 2024-25 budget. As the expenditure was incurred in financial year 2023-24, there was no impact on the 2024-25 budget.

You noted in your letter that a figure of £200,000 for the proposed contribution was included in one submission and asked what the rationale was for raising this to £250,000. My office judged that £250,000 was appropriate considering the clear humanitarian circumstances and the availability of funding.

You asked if there were conversations with UNRWA about publicity relating to the announcement of the contribution including in the context of the First Minister's meeting with UNRWA officials. I can confirm that officials did discuss communication relating to the contribution, and indeed a quote from UNRWA was included in the Scottish Government news release announcing the funding for Gaza on 13 October 2023. UNRWA also separately issued a news release. It is normal practice to discuss with organisations receiving humanitarian contributions from the Scottish Government how best to inform the public to raise awareness of the contributions but also so that the public can better understand why a contribution is being made and how it will be used. Unless you are suggesting that such transparency is inappropriate, it would appear that, once again, your purported concerns are another bad faith attempt to malign humanitarian aid efforts.

In your letter you asked if consideration was given to involving FCDO officials in the decision-making process. As noted above, FCDO officials were informed in advance of the likelihood of a Scottish Government contribution to UNRWA and they in turn informed Scottish Government officials about the UK Government's contributions to UNRWA. It was therefore clear that a decision to contribute to UNRWA would be consistent with UK Government policy (regular engagement with FCDO officials ensures that the Scottish Government's international development work always supports Ministers of the Crown).

It would not, however, be appropriate for UK officials to have a formal role in decisions relating to expenditure by the Scottish Government, which is accountable to the Scottish Parliament. I do, however, believe that in pursuing this line of questioning you appear to give the impression that your aim is to undermine the democratically agreed upon powers of the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government.

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In relation to representation from local or international charities or representatives from political action groups related to the Palestinian cause, you will appreciate that Ministers receive correspondence and representations from organisations on a wide range of subjects as a matter of course. Following the Hamas terror attacks of 7 October and the subsequent Israeli military action in the Gaza Strip, correspondence and representations on the subject obviously increased significantly.

Finally, I would like to point out that the facts set out above leave no room for any conclusion other than that your letter and wider actions have been motivated by bad faith and a willingness to use a humanitarian crisis for unworthy political purposes. Men, women and children are dying daily and as we provide assistance through humanitarian aid, you have chosen to try to weaponise that for political reasons which is very disappointing.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "K. Stewart". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kaukab Stewart MSP
Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development

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