

8 July 2013

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Kiri Tunks  
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*Dear Ms Tunks,*

Thank you for your joint letter of 25 June, with Sir Geoffrey Bindman QC and Lisa Nandy MP, about Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs).

I share your concerns about the treatment of Palestinian children detained in Israeli prisons. As you note, we funded and facilitated the independent report on Children in Military Custody by leading British lawyers. I wrote to the Israeli Ambassador last year to urge Israel to take action on the report. I have since raised the report with the Israeli Justice Minister during my visit to Israel and the OPTs on 10-13 June, and I discussed the issue in detail with the Israeli Attorney General when he visited London on 20 June. This subject has also been the focus of discussions between the Attorney General, Dominic Grieve, and his Israeli counterpart last November and again on 19 June.

My officials also discussed the recommendations with a senior Israeli legal delegation in January, whilst the British Ambassador in Tel Aviv has raised them with a number of senior Israeli government figures and has since written again to the Justice Minister on the subject.

The Israeli Attorney General confirmed to me that he treats this issue very seriously. He and his delegation outlined various steps that Israel has taken to address the concerns expressed in this and other reports, and to reduce the legal disparity between the treatment of Palestinian children and the treatment of children in Israel. These steps have included the creation of a special court for minors; a change in the age of majority; reductions in the length of time children can be held in pre-trial detention and in the period children can be held before being brought before a judge; and steps to grant parents legal status to be represented in court.

We have welcomed these steps but have pressed for further measures, including the mandatory use of audio-visual recording of interrogations and an end to solitary confinement for children. We have also outlined our concerns on the issues of night-time arrests, the use of shackles and the continued transfer of Palestinian child and adult detainees to prisons inside Israel in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention. I can assure you that we will continue to press for further progress on this important subject and for Israel to uphold its obligations under international law in the OPTs.

You also raised the involvement of G4S in the Israeli prison system. Although international law does not impose direct obligations on corporations, the British Government has made clear our concerns about Israel's treatment of Palestinian detainees to G4S and our clear position on the illegality of settlements, including at a meeting with representatives from G4S in October 2012. On 21 April, G4S publicly announced that they would not renew a number of security-related contracts in the West Bank 'to ensure that G4S Israel business practices remain in line with [G4S] own business ethics policy'. These include the servicing of security equipment at Ofer Military Prison, at West Bank checkpoints and at a police station in the contentious E-1 area of Jerusalem.

The Government is developing a UK action plan on business and human rights - based on the UN Guiding Principles - which will soon be launched. We will be one of the first countries to produce a national strategy to implement the Guiding Principles on business and human rights. The strategy will express the Government's expectation that British companies will show respect for human rights in their operations in the UK and internationally.

*Your sincerely*

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Alistair Burt', with a horizontal line underneath.

ALISTAIR BURT