

Speech: Annual Human Rights Day reception 2017: Lord Ahmad's speech

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, welcome to you all to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. It's an honour indeed to welcome such strong advocates on this important issue to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

In particular, I would like to thank Mervyn Thomas from [Christian Solidarity Worldwide](#) and also welcome both Tina and Alissa to the panel, and I look forward to working with all of you, indeed everyone in this room, on this important issue.

I am also delighted to acknowledge that we are joined this morning by my colleague and friend, Minister of State [Lord Bates](#), who is the Minister of State at the Department for International Development. Michael and I have been working on this agenda and others, hand in glove, and I think it underlines the importance that we in the government, are attaching to cross-Whitehall working.

I am also delighted to welcome the Chairman of the APPG Baroness Fiona Hodgson to the room, and there are others in this room who know that faith is part and centre of the challenges we face, and it is important to ensure the voice of the oppressed, the voice of those who don't have a voice, is heard.

Importance of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)

And therefore, we all ask the question, why does freedom of religion or belief matter? It matters simply because the short answer is that religion itself matters to a huge number of people. To us in this room and beyond.

According to the Pew Research Centre, religious faith guides the daily life of more than 80% of the world's population. I was once asked very recently, about the importance and priorities that I lay in my own life, and I mentioned 2 things beginning with F – family and faith. Because I think these are the things which transcend all professions, all walks of life, and they are important in what defines us.

As a man of faith myself, religion certainly does matter to me. So does the freedom to practice my faith without fear of discrimination or persecution. I am proud to be Minister of a country, born and bred in a country where I can do just that.

When I travel around the world, I say this, that Britain is the best place to be a Muslim. It is the best place to be a Christian, a Jew, a Sikh, a Hindu, a Buddhist or whatever faith you choose to follow, or indeed if you have no faith. Because that is what defines our country. The strength of our diversity, the strength of our communities. The strength of our faith communities, and those of no faith.

The freedoms enjoyed here in the United Kingdom by people of all faiths and none, I believe passionately, should be enjoyed by everyone, everywhere.

This matters not only because of the importance of religion in and of itself. It also matters, ladies and gentlemen, because promoting tolerance, actually not just tolerance, but understanding and respect for all, helps to create a platform for a stable and prosperous society.

By ensuring that everyone can contribute, society as a whole is better off. There is also clear evidence to suggest that the tolerant and inclusive societies are better equipped to resist extremism. Those of you who know me know that I feel very passionately about this issue of tackling radicalisation and extremism. Because if we can tackle extremism at its origin, we will be able to deal with the challenges of terrorism that we face, not just in our own country, but around the world.

For all these reasons, freedom of religion or belief is vitally important. It is essential.

Nevertheless, as we all know, religious persecution, which has caused conflict and intolerable human suffering for centuries, has tragically still not been consigned to the history books. In many parts of the world, and for many people of faith, it remains an everyday reality.

States not meeting obligations

70 years on since the adoption of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), as we look around the globe, far too many states are still failing to protect all their citizens' rights to worship freely. They are failing to prevent religious discrimination, failing to ensure people of all faiths and none are protected by the law.

In some cases, states are acting in even more harmful ways than they did before. They are not only failing to protect the rights of religious minorities, they are actively contributing to the suppression and violation of those rights. This is a reality for many across the world today, the Assyrian Christians of Iraq; the Rohingya Muslims of Burma; the Baha'is in Iran; the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia to name but a few.

All are being failed by the very people whose responsibility it is to protect them.

The responsibility was set out in the Universal Declaration and enshrined into law under the [International Convention on Civil and Political Rights](#). All states party to that Convention must protect people in their jurisdiction from discrimination, protect their right to worship freely, change their religion – often a crime in many parts of the world, or have no religion, and to have the right, if you have no faith, to be equally protected as citizens of a country.

On behalf of the British government I call on all states party to that International Convention to uphold these binding principles.

Government action

Our government, led by our Prime Minister Mrs May, has made this a key priority. Our Prime Minister herself has spoken of the need to “stand up for people of all religions to practice their beliefs in peace and safety”.

That is why I have asked our global diplomatic network to prioritise this critical area of work. This effort takes a number of forms: from direct diplomacy to project work; from multilateral consensus building to collaboration with faith leaders. And I am delighted that we are joined by His Grace Bishop Angaelos and I know and appreciate and thank you for the work you do as well.

Bilateral action

Our commitment to this issue also means that we directly engage and lobby at the highest levels of government on behalf of persecuted minorities. Let me just give you some current examples.

In Burma, UK ministers have raised our deepest [concerns about the persecution of Rohingya Muslims](#) with both the civilian government and the military authorities. As the United Nations have said, they have called this a classic case of ethnic cleansing of a community.

We have pressed them to enable refugees to return in safety and to investigate allegations of human rights abuses. We are not alone in this. We are working together with other international partners. This bilateral lobbying is complemented by our work at the UN as well. And indeed, I am working very closely with Special Representative Pramila Patten on this very issue.

And last week, [I attended a Special Session of the Human Rights Council](#) in Geneva, which focused specifically on the plight of the Rohingya Muslims. We have also expressed to the Burmese authorities our concern over the intimidation faced by Christians in Chin, Kachin and Kayin States. I was pleased to host a roundtable with faith and civil society leaders in October looking at how we can work together to protect freedom of religion or belief in Burma.

Reflecting, when I look at religion, and religion is often to blame, I say do not blame the faith, do not blame the religion. There are those who claim to follow a particular faith, yet they don't follow it. They hijack it, misrepresent it and use it in a way that is to justify their own heinous crimes. That must end.

And, this is not just in Burma, but in other parts of the world. Most recently, we have had discussions with Pakistan's Human Rights Ministry. Our Minister for Asia Mark Field recently raised the discrimination suffered by Christian communities, and the Ahmadiyya communities. And I also made sure that this was the focus of the UK's response on Pakistan's Universal Period Review at the [Human Rights Council in November](#), where we asked for an

electoral register free of religious bias.

Yet tragically, recent events in that very country demonstrate how much more work is still to be done. In Eritrea, we called on the government to release all prisoners detained for their religious beliefs, including the Orthodox Patriarch, Abune Antonios. And as we look out to the Middle East, the persecution of religious minorities by Daesh, including the Yazidis, was there for all to see, and has been particularly horrifying.

But, ladies and gentlemen, the UK has played a leading role in the international campaign to defeat Daesh on the battlefield. And only this weekend, we saw the Iraqi Prime Minister acknowledge that Daesh had been defeated in Iraq as well.

We must now continue to work to hold them to account and to fight for justice for those who have suffered, not just in Iraq and Syria, but also those around the world who have been victims of terrorist attacks in an indiscriminate fashion. And that is why the UK has committed £1 million to help set up a UN special investigation team. Starting in Iraq, this team will collect, preserve and store evidence of crimes committed by Daesh, so that we can bring them to justice. The team will be led by a Special Adviser with a mandate to promote this goal around the world.

Defeating Daesh and holding them to account is just the start of our campaign to defend freedom of religion or belief in the Middle East. The next step is to work with our Iraqi allies to ensure that they remain committed to protecting the rights of religious minorities across the country.

Multilateral work

More broadly, we will also work with our international partners to ensure that the obligation to defend freedom of religion or belief is woven ever deeper into the fabric of international relations. An important element of this remains our work to maintain consensus on freedom of religion or belief in key resolutions – principally at the United Nations – but also in the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Cooperation and Security in Europe.

Projects

Another diplomatic tool at our disposal is our project work through the Magna Carta Fund. One of those projects supports the work of Hardwired Inc in promoting religious tolerance in both Morocco and Lebanon, and we will hear about that from Tina Ramirez shortly, and I pay tribute to their work in this respect.

Work with faith actors

The other important strand of our human rights work, is one that I have given particular priority to, is collaboration. Yes, we talk about international action, but we must take communities with us. That's why many of you know

that I have put particular emphasis on collaboration with faith leaders and religious representatives. This cooperation is hugely beneficial to our work, which is why I have established a regular roundtable with a changing cast of faith leaders and civil society representatives to address the issues in front of us.

This is an opportunity to discuss important foreign policy topics from a different perspective, and provides a platform for dialogue on how government can work better with faith groups to find solutions to international challenges. The second of these roundtable takes place tomorrow, when we will look at the role of women in tackling religiously motivated violent extremism.

On that point, I have been astounded at times about the lack of women being represented. When we are looking at issues of peace, resolving conflict, and yes, dealing with violent extremism, all too often I enter a room and I say this as a man, myself, that when I look around the table, to try and resolve these issues, trying to meet the challenges, and look for practical solutions, there are only men in the room.

That is not acceptable and therefore we must need to tackle that head on. Therefore, I have been recently also promoting the importance of women being part and parcel of tackling the issues and challenges that we face around countering violent extremism.

Conclusion

In a moment I will hand over to Mervyn Thomas, but before I do so, I look around this room and see many friends, many people I work with, have previously worked with, and continue to work with today, and I look forward to working with you all in our tomorrows.

But in doing so, may I thank you on behalf of our Prime Minister, on behalf of the Foreign Secretary, and all across government for your commitment, your determination, your perseverance, often I know, in challenging situations. But your perseverance, ladies and gentlemen, is showing dividends and together in a collaborative fashion, we can achieve so much more.

As Minister of State at the Foreign Office, responsible for Human Rights, I assure you I am absolutely determined to ensure that the UK is doing all it can to promote, protect, sustain and strengthen freedom of religion or belief around the world. I know that we have the political will, the people and the influence necessary to make progress. And with your support, your collaboration, the strength of your organisations and your networks, I am confident we will deliver and we will succeed.

Thank you.

Press release: Ipswich Tidal Flood Barrier Gate a step closer

Huge hydraulic arms that will operate Ipswich's new tidal flood gate have been installed, taking the vital £70 million project 1 step closer to completion.

VIPs, including the Environment Agency chief executive Sir James Bevan, attended an open day to see the latest work on the flood defence scheme, which will significantly reduce the risk of flooding for 2,000 homes and businesses in the town.

The 200 tonne tidal gate was manufactured in the Netherlands and arrived in Suffolk in October, a significant milestone in the 4 year project. The gate is 22 metres wide and will stand 9 metres tall when in its "closed position". It is finished with 5 tonnes of special paint that will help protect it, as it spends most of its life under water.

It was lowered into place by a specially constructed 1,000 tonne crane and the operating mechanism and control building are now being installed.

The project is being undertaken by Environment Agency contractor VBA – a joint venture between VolkerStevin, Boskalis Westminster and Atkins – and is due to be completed next year.

Sir James Bevan, chief executive at the Environment Agency, said:

Its been fantastic to visit the Ipswich tidal barrier gate and see this incredible feat of engineering. The £70 million barrier will not only help reduce the threat of flooding for 2,000 homes and businesses but also be a boost for the area's economy. Working with partners has been key to the scheme's success and I look forward to seeing the finished scheme.

Floods Minister, Thérèse Coffey, said:

Suffolk is no stranger to flooding and the devastating impacts it can have. That is why I am really pleased that we have made progress with this scheme which is a key part of the regeneration of our county town.

This new £70 million barrier is brilliant news for Ipswich and is just 1 example of our investment across Suffolk to better protect communities across the county from flooding.

The Ipswich Flood Defence Management Strategy (IFDMS) will increase the standard of protection and takes into account current climate change predictions.

The final element of the scheme involves building a tidal barrier across the New Cut River in Ipswich with associated works to tie it into the new east and west bank walls and gates.

The flood defence scheme, which will reduce the risk of flooding to 1,608 homes and 422 businesses and support key infrastructure, has been partnership funded by: the Environment Agency, Ipswich Borough Council, Department for Communities and Local Government, the Haven Gateway Partnership, and the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership.

The barrier gate is expected to be operational in the spring of 2018.

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[Press release: MHRA awarded over £980,000 for collaboration with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the World Health Organisation](#)

We are delighted to announce a new partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the World Health Organisation that aims to extensively improve the safety monitoring of medicines in low and middle-income countries (LMIC).

New medicines and vaccines, for diseases such as malaria and HIV, may be introduced for the first time in LMIC's where there are weak or no regulatory

systems in place for effective safety monitoring. These new treatments have been developed with urgent public health needs in mind and therefore the need to gather and analyse information quickly on their safety and effectiveness is important. The healthcare and regulatory systems in these settings may often lack the tools, training and capacity to operate a robust safety monitoring system. Whilst great progress has been made with many of LMIC's now involved as members of the World Health Organization Program for International Drug Monitoring, the experience in collecting, assessing and acting on adverse reaction data, and risk management planning is limited.

Without an effective system, public health programs are at risk and patients may be affected, should they suffer from adverse drug reactions (ADRs) which are not promptly identified and treated. This can consequently undermine the program and result in a loss of trust in the product or a vaccine. Ultimately, this may lead to lower uptake and therefore, the disease not being effectively treated.

WHO and the Gates Foundation have launched 'Project Smart Safety Surveillance' (also known as Project 3-S) to help LMIC's identify, assess, and adequately manage the risks associated with new products. MHRA will be joining this initiative to bring regulatory expertise to the project. This will be for a 3-year period where it is intended to run three pilot exercises in different LMIC settings.

Dr Ian Hudson, Chief Executive Officer at MHRA said:

We are delighted to be involved in such an important global initiative. New drugs and vaccines are being brought to the market for the first time in public health programmes in settings where the safety monitoring and regulatory systems need strengthening. The expertise we can bring to the project will help national safety monitoring centres identify risks and benefits early and take appropriate regulatory action to support global health.

Dr Dan Hartman of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation said:

The Triple S project is vitally important to the success of public health programmes to combat some of the world's major diseases. When a new medicine or vaccine is being used it is critical that potential risks are identified early and well understood. The involvement of MHRA in this project will ensure scientific and regulatory expertise are developed within the national centres.

[Dr Ian Hudson discusses a new partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the World Health Organisation](#)

News story: UK-Japan Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meeting 2017 – Joint Statement

1. The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs of the UK, the Rt Hon Boris Johnson, the Secretary of State for Defence, the Rt Hon Gavin Williamson, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, H.E. Mr. Taro Kono, and the Minister of Defence, H.E. Mr. Itsunori Onodera met in London on 14 December 2017 for the third UK-Japan Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meeting.
2. The Ministers reaffirmed that the UK and Japan are each other's closest security partners in Europe and Asia respectively. They welcomed the strong progress made in defence and security co-operation since the last UK-Japan Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meeting. They expressed their commitment to elevating their global security partnership to the next level, as confirmed during Prime Minister May's visit to Japan in August 2017, and to promoting new and comprehensive programme of co-operation, building on the "UK-Japan Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation". In this regard, they welcomed the creation of a joint Action Plan on security and defence co-operation, which will be revised regularly as a living document.
3. The Ministers affirmed the UK and Japan's global strategic partnership, which is underpinned by common strategic interests and fundamental values. They expressed their commitment to maintaining the rules-based international system, which is the foundation of global security and prosperity, including through harnessing the UK's vision of "Global Britain" and Japan's vision of "Proactive Contribution to Peace" based on the principle of international cooperation. They reconfirmed the importance of promoting quality infrastructure with open, fair and sustainable access for enhanced regional connectivity. They emphasised the importance of international order based on the rule of law, and expressed their strong opposition to any unilateral actions that increase tensions or change the status quo by force or coercion.
4. The Ministers reaffirmed that a free and open maritime order based on the rule of law is an important pillar of the stability and prosperity of the international community and committed to strengthening maritime security co-operation. They confirmed that it is of mutual benefit to work together, with partners, to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific region. Japan's Ministers welcomed the UK's strengthened security engagement in this region, including through visits by maritime, land and air forces, such as the potential deployment of a UK aircraft carrier. Japan also welcomed the UK's commitment to the security of the Asia-Pacific region through the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA).

5. The Ministers condemned, in the strongest terms, North Korea's continued development of its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes in flagrant violation of relevant UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, including the launch of a ballistic missile with possible intercontinental range on 29 November 2017. They strongly urged North Korea to comply with all relevant UNSC resolutions and the 2005 Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks and stressed that they would never recognise a nuclear-armed North Korea. The Ministers affirmed that they would apply maximum pressure on North Korea to urge it to take concrete actions towards abandoning its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner, and realising denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula. To this end, the Ministers called on the international community to fully implement UNSC resolutions, including resolution 2375 adopted unanimously on 11 September 2017. They urged other countries to reconsider economic relations with North Korea, and shared the view that they would continue to closely work together to take measures at the UNSC, including those against sanction evasions and further provocations. The Ministers also strongly urged North Korea to end human rights violations and resolve the abductions issue immediately.
6. The Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to maintaining a rules-based order in the maritime domain based on the principles of international law, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and to the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes through diplomatic and legal means. They remained concerned about the situation in the East and South China Seas and strongly opposed to any unilateral actions that could increase tensions. They also supported the early conclusion of negotiations to establish an effective Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. The Ministers shared recognition that such diplomatic effort should lead to demilitarisation of disputed features.
7. The Ministers confirmed their commitment to ensuring the stability and prosperity of the Middle East. They welcomed progress in fight against ISIL, such as announcement of the liberation of all Iraqi territories and Raqqa in Syria, as an important step for the peace and stability in the Middle East and the international community, and emphasised the importance of bringing ISIL to justice. They underscored the significance of supporting the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the nuclear programme of Iran, and its continued implementation by all parties.
8. The Ministers reiterated their solid commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and requested for the peaceful solution through the complete implementation of the Minsk process by all parties. The Ministers also reaffirmed their commitment to supporting the engagement to political and economic stability of Ukraine and its reform programme.
9. The Ministers welcomed the progress of defence co-operation through bilateral and multilateral joint exercises, including UK-Japan bilateral exercise Guardian North on the occasion of UK Typhoons' visit to Japan in 2016. The

Ministers confirmed that in 2018 UK-Japan bilateral ground exercise would take place for the first time in Japan and that both countries would take various opportunities such as deployment of HMS Argyll and HMS Sutherland to the Asia-Pacific region to conduct bilateral exercises. The Ministers also decided to seek to regularise bilateral exercises and others including observer exchanges. The Ministers also welcomed steady progress in unit-to-unit exchanges, which are an important basis of the bilateral relationship.

10. The Ministers confirmed the progress of the UK-Japan High Level Defence Equipment and Technology Cooperation Steering Panel, and defence equipment and technology co-operation, and looked forward to deepening collaboration. Reflecting on the progress of the co-operative research project on the feasibility study on a Joint New Air-to-Air Missile (JNAAM) Phase 2, the Ministers looked forward to the early embodiment of the joint research project including the research prototyping and the launch testing. The Ministers welcomed that the first bilateral co-operative research project of Chemical and Biological Protection Technology was successfully completed in July 2017. They welcomed progress made on the Project for the Cooperative Research on Personnel Vulnerability Evaluation, and confirmed the exploration of possible co-operation on projects of interest including the Joint Preliminary Study on Potential Collaborative Opportunities for Future Combat Air System/ Future Fighter, launched in March this year.
11. On the basis of the recently concluded Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), the Ministers shared the view that they would enhance co-operation in providing each other with logistical, technical and professional support. They shared the view that they would build on the ACSA and, as a priority, work on a framework to improve administrative, policy and legal procedures to facilitate joint operations and exercises between British Armed Forces and Japan Self-Defense Forces.
12. The Ministers welcomed the progress of co-ordination of capacity-building in developing countries in Southeast Asia, South Asia, Middle East and Africa. They shared the view that they would use a coordination mechanism for future joint capacity- building in strategic priorities such as maritime security and safety; counterterrorism; cyber security; humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; promotion of quality infrastructure; gender; peacekeeping operations; and demining.
13. The Ministers welcomed the UK-Japan counter-terrorism dialogue scheduled in January 2018 and confirmed that the UK and Japan would further deepen co-operation, including counter terrorism co-operation through concrete measures on security toward Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games and capacity- building for counter-terrorism and aviation security in third countries.
14. Recognising the rapidly growing threat of malicious cyber activities, the Ministers shared the view that they would further strengthen information sharing and co-operation in the field of cyber security, including by holding

again the UK-Japan Bilateral Consultations on Cyberspace in February 2018. They confirmed that the UK and Japan would strengthen co-ordinated response and information sharing in order to deter, mitigate and attribute malicious cyber activities.

15. The Ministers shared the view that they would continue co-operation in multilateral frameworks such as the UN, G7 and G20. The Ministers reaffirmed that the UK and Japan will work together to expedite UN reform, in support of Secretary-General Guterres' initiatives on peace and security reform, development system reform and management reform. On UNSC reform, emphasising the need to launch text-based negotiations during the 72th session of the UN General Assembly, the Ministers shared the view that they would accelerate the co-operation towards an early reform of the UNSC including the expansion of both permanent and non-permanent categories of its membership. The UK reaffirmed its strong support for UNSC permanent membership for Japan, as well as the other G4 nations, alongside permanent African representation, and expanded non-permanent African representation. With regards to NATO, of which the UK is a key member, the Ministers expressed their intention to promote further NATO-Japan co-operation to enhance Japan's partnership.
16. The Ministers reaffirmed the importance of engaging in Women, Peace and Security, providing support and protection for the victims of sexual violence in conflict, and prevention of conflict-related sexual violence.
17. The Ministers confirmed that the UK and Japan would continue to work together globally to end violence against children and modern slavery, including full implementation of the Call to Action. They shared the view that they would make active participation in the WePROTECT Global Alliance to end online child sexual exploitation and in the 2030 Agenda for Children: End Violence Solutions Summit.
18. The Ministers reaffirmed that outer space activity is fundamental to our mutual prosperity and security. They decided to strengthen co-operation to address safety and security challenges in outer space and promote international norms of responsible behaviour for all outer space activities, through further dialogues. They also welcomed the establishment of a new framework of industrial space co-operation under the Industrial Policy Dialogue.
19. The Ministers reiterated that the UK and Japan would continue to co-operate on disarmament and non-proliferation, upholding the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons as the cornerstone of the international nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime. They underlined the importance of working together with partners across the international community to prevent proliferation and make progress on nuclear disarmament through concrete and practical measures with the participation of nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states. In this context, the Ministers welcomed the adoption on 4 December 2017 by the UN General Assembly of Japan's resolution

on Nuclear Disarmament, co-sponsored by the UK.

20. The Ministers recognised the importance of close co-operation to control the transfer and illicit flow of conventional arms and dual use items, especially those used in WMD delivery. The UK welcomed Japan's appointment as President for the Fourth Conference of the Arms Trade Treaty. The Ministers shared the view that they would work together to ensure strong progress on our common objectives for the Treaty.
21. The Ministers welcomed the close bilateral co-operation in civil nuclear energy, such as through the sharing of experience and expertise at the Sixth Annual UK-Japan Nuclear Dialogue held in London in October this year, and other collaborative projects. At the same time, both sides welcomed Japanese industry involvement in the UK's new build programme as part of a broad and strategic industrial partnership between the two countries.
22. The Ministers welcomed the progress of information sharing and analysis between the two countries, and shared the view that they would strengthen co-operation in this field.
23. The Ministers instructed their respective officials to closely follow up the results of today's meeting and report to the next Foreign and Defence Ministerial Meeting.