

## **Press release: Secretary of State's statement on NI political talks**

Mr Brokenshire commented:

Three weeks ago the people of Northern Ireland voted overwhelmingly for effective, devolved, power sharing government.

Since then I have been working intensively with the political parties and with the Irish government to find a way forward, including putting forward a number of proposals

I am determined to see a functioning Executive in place at Stormont. I have spoken to the Prime Minister this afternoon and this remains the UK government's continuing priority.

This is the necessary first step to addressing the issues of greatest public concern – health, education and other public services in Northern Ireland.

Even at this stage I urge political parties to agree to work to form an Executive and provide people here with the strong and stable devolved government that they want.

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## **News story: Foreign Office statement on demonstrations in Belarus**

We have closely followed events in Belarus leading up to, and during, the Freedom Day demonstrations. We are concerned over the actions of the law enforcement agencies in Minsk. A large number of citizens, activists and journalists appear to have been arbitrarily and indiscriminately detained.

There is no justification for the use of force or intimidation against those exercising their right to peaceful protest. We urge the Government of Belarus to respect and uphold the right to freedom of association, assembly and

expression. We further call on the government of Belarus to release all those peaceful protesters still detained.

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## [News story: Baroness Anelay welcomes conclusions of UN Human Rights Council](#)

This was the first Human Rights Council (HRC) session since the UK's successful re-election in November to serve a second term on the Council. The UK, represented at Ministerial level by my colleague Mr Sharma, Minister for Asia, played a leading role on a number of important issues, including Syria, Sri Lanka and South Sudan, as well as supporting on Burma, DPRK and Iran.

I welcome the adoption of a strong resolution on Syria, which includes renewing the mandate of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI). The COI's vital work highlights the unspeakable atrocities being perpetrated in Syria. We will continue to call for those responsible for violations and abuses of international law to be held to account. We remain concerned at the lack of humanitarian access in Syria. We call on the regime to abandon its callous siege and starvation tactics and allow for the immediate, unhindered delivery of aid.

The report presented by the Human Rights Commission in South Sudan was deeply worrying. Following the peace agreement in August 2015, our hope that a transitional government of national unity might turn the tide of violence and begin the process of reconciliation looks to remain just that, a hope. So I welcome the adoption of a resolution, by consensus and with South Sudan's support, that will extend the Commission's work and strengthen its mandate.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) report on Sri Lanka highlighted notable improvements in its human rights situation. But much remains to be done in order to address the legacy of Sri Lanka's armed conflict. I welcomed Sri Lanka co-sponsoring a resolution at this session, sending a strong signal on the importance the Government attaches to reconciliation and human rights. I urge the Government of Sri Lanka to provide the leadership required to fully deliver on its commitments, to develop a comprehensive, time-bound implementation strategy, and to give due consideration to the conclusions of the report of the Consultation Task Force on reconciliation mechanisms.

I thank the Special Rapporteur on Burma for her report to the Council, acknowledging the progress made by the Government in its first year, while outlining the complex human rights challenges that remain, in particular conflict-related violations in Rakhine, Shan and Kachin States. I welcome the establishment of an independent international Fact Finding Mission to look into recent human rights violations, and urge the Burmese authorities to cooperate fully. The UK stands ready to assist the Government in this

endeavour and tackling other long-standing human rights challenges. I welcome the resolution on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), which draws upon the recommendations made by the Group of Independent Experts on accountability. I hope the UN Special Rapporteur will continue the important task of developing an effective accountability framework with OHCHR in Seoul. The UK will continue to work with partners to maintain international pressure on the DPRK. I call on the Government of the DPRK to take credible steps to address the shocking human rights record and prioritise the welfare of the North Korean people above the country's nuclear and ballistic missile programme.

The situation in Libya remains a grave concern, as highlighted in the latest joint report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the United Nations Support Mission in Libya. I condemn the recent upsurge in violence between armed groups both in Tripoli and in the oil crescent, and am deeply concerned by reports of human rights abuses and violations by combatants in Benghazi and elsewhere. Those responsible must be held to account. I welcome the efforts of the Presidency Council and other mediators to de-escalate the situation and secure ceasefires. I urge calm on all sides to avoid further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in the country. The UK welcomes the Council's support for the resolution and the emphasis on accountability.

I welcome the renewal of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Iran. The human rights situation within the country is deeply worrying, in particular the continued execution of juvenile offenders. The newly introduced Charter on Citizen's Rights has the potential to make a positive impact and I urge Iran to grant immediate access to the Special Rapporteur so she can work with them to implement it.

I also welcome the adoption of the resolution on the situation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The human rights situation there is deeply concerning. For too long, international organisations have been denied access by the de facto authorities to these increasingly isolated territories. I welcome the opportunity for detailed and objective reporting by the OHCHR. I trust that the de facto authorities in South Ossetia and Abkhazia will grant the mandated access to the High Commissioner and his Office.

The UK once again played a strong role in supporting consensus on the adoption of both the EU's 'Freedom of Religion or Belief' resolution and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation's text on the combating religious intolerance resolution. Tackling restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, and addressing intolerance and violent extremism should be a priority for all UN Member States.

This Council has once again reaffirmed the vital role that Human Rights Defenders play in promoting and protecting human rights. The ability of our citizens to hold governments to account, to freely express opinions, to hold and avow their beliefs, is an essential element of protecting our dignity as individuals and societies. In too many parts of the world that ability is being challenged or restricted. During this session, we have also seen attempts by some delegations to restrict the participation of NGOs at the

Human Rights Council. Civil society must be able to engage actively in the United Nations – it is in the interests of the international community that they do so. Civil society furthers the UN’s ideals, is a source of evidence and expertise, and supports the implementation of the UN’s work. We restrict civil society space at our peril.

The UK remains committed to ensuring that the Council’s Universal Periodic Review process delivers real improvements on human rights. I am pleased that the UK took the lead alongside Paraguay, Morocco and Brazil on a joint statement this session, outlining commitments to improve implementation of UPR recommendations. We were pleased to lead a joint statement on the Rule of Law, stressing that implementation is as important as the rules themselves.

Finally, in addition to our duty to address egregious human rights issues, I believe we must acknowledge positive developments. We should encourage a “race to the top” as States engage positively with the UN human rights system and support each other in translating political will into action. Alongside Colombia, the UK launched the “Race to the Top” initiative during the September HRC session. This session we delivered a joint statement on the initiative, which we were pleased enjoyed broad support.

At the start of our second term serving on the HRC, the UK was pleased to play a leading role on a number of critical dossiers. We look forward to working with member states on consolidating progress made in this session.

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## **Speech: “What we’re witnessing is a systematic and corrosive assault on history, on religion, on the very fabric of identity”**

Let me begin by thanking our briefers this morning, by welcoming the unanimous adoption of resolution 2347, and by paying tribute to France and to Italy for bringing this issue to the Council.

Today all our briefers, and all members of this Council, have really brought home the sheer scale of the problem that we face. Whether in Timbuktu, Palmyra or Bamiyan, this is an issue that goes beyond statues, beyond artefacts and beyond museums. What we’re witnessing is a systematic and corrosive assault on history, on religion, on the very fabric of identity. What we are witnessing are, in many cases, war crimes.

This isn’t just wanton pillaging and vandalism, this is a matter of international peace and security. Stolen statues in Syria and Iraq don’t just line the pockets of opportunists and looters, they provide a source of

revenue for Daesh. And in the region, the destruction of religious and cultural sites is about more than just bricks and mortar; sectarian division can be fuelled by pickaxes and sledgehammers just as it can be by bullets and guns.

So let us respond to this cultural destruction with the same intensity and the same unity of purpose as any other threat to international peace and security.

Through this resolution today we have taken a step forward in doing so. This unanimous resolution shows the strength of our resolve and of our condemnation of such actions. It shows our commitment and determination to act against perpetrators so that we can combat terrorism, prevent conflict and protect vulnerable communities. But as with so many issues before this Council, implementation is now needed. The UK will do its utmost to do so.

That is why we have established a \$30 million Cultural Program Fund to support projects which help foster, safeguard and promote cultural heritage in countries affected by conflict.

These projects are helping complete the new museum in Basrah, helping protect heritage and traditional craft skills in Kabul, and supporting advanced archaeological techniques and technology for archaeologists across the Middle East and North Africa.

It's an effort furthered by the British Museum who are training Iraqi heritage sector workers, so that they have the skills needed to assess and record the condition of their heritage sites and carry out "rescue archaeology" as required. It's already bearing fruit; a participant in the training has been appointed by the Iraqi State Board to lead the assessment of the site of Nimrud, recently released from Daesh control. And another participant is looking forward to returning to Mosul Museum soon.

But it isn't enough to train civilians. It's often the brave men and women of the armed forces who are at the frontline of the threat against culture heritage. That's why the United Kingdom last year set up a Cultural Property Protection Unit so that respect for cultural property is further integrated into training and operations of our armed forces. This includes respecting domestic and international law, as well as the obligations of the 1954 Hague Convention and its Protocols, which we will shortly ratify.

The action we take as a Council or as member states will count for little unless we show there are real consequences for those who carry out these acts. Truly to rid the world of this scourge, we need to deter and punish, as well as prevent.

Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi was the first person convicted by the International Criminal Court for attacking protected sites, but he cannot be the last. If we are to deter others from following his path, we need to see more convictions, more consequences. His story should serve as a warning to all those who choose to attack cultural heritage; a warning that this Council must ensure is heeded.

Thank you.

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## **Press release: Official opening for A556 Knutsford to Bowdon link road**

Highways England chief executive Jim O'Sullivan and Tatton MP George Osborne, chair of the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, marked the project's completion – on time and on budget – by planting a tree on the innovative Green Bridge which crosses the road south of the A50 at Mere and is a key feature of the new road's environmental mitigation measures.

The 4 mile new road, which opened on Monday 6 March, bypasses the old A556 and the villages of Mere, Bucklow Hill and Over Tabley – providing a quicker and more reliable link between junction 19 of the M6 and junction 7 of the M56 for the 50,000 vehicles, including 7,000 lorries, which rely on the motorway to motorway connection every day.

Jim O'Sullivan, Chief Executive, Highways England said:

The A556 is a key strategic route linking the West Midlands and Cheshire to Greater Manchester and Manchester International Airport. The old road was heavily congested and compromised by busy crossroads. This new road, built to modern standards, will provide faster and more reliable journeys between the 2 motorways – benefiting commerce and commuters alike.

We would like to thank local people and road users for their patience and support over nearly two and a half years while we have worked to deliver this new road on time and on budget.

The new road is the first major North West project to be delivered in the Government's £15 billion investment in the strategic road network up to 2021. With the new dual carriageway now open, work will focus on converting the old A556 to the B5569 – with a new single carriageway road for local communities alongside a segregated green corridor for pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders. Once this work is completed the new B road will be handed over to Cheshire East Council.

Work will also be taking place over the next few weeks to complete the unique Green Bridge – providing connectivity over the new road for farm animals but also for wild mammals, birds and other animals. The Green Bridge is one of 7 bridges provided to either carry key local roads such as the A50 over the new road or provide a link to the new dual carriageway for local communities.

In the last 28 months the project has also involved:

- digging out 1 million cubic metres of earth – all of it recycled to other parts of the project such as embankment and noise bund construction – enough to fill the Manchester Arena 3 times
- pouring 7,500 cubic metres (18,000 tonnes) of concrete for the 7 bridges and underpass and other structures – enough to fill 3 Olympics-size swimming pools
- rolling out over 200,000 square metres of blacktop for the new road surface, enough to cover 30 football pitches
- making 100s of pre-cast manholes off-site and building an on-site concrete batching site to reduce ready-mix concrete deliveries and cut down lorry movements
- installing more than 30 kilometres of new drainage pipes along the route
- providing 4 large attenuation ponds to store water run-off from the new road to prevent flooding
- delivering 9 new habitats for legally-protected Great Crested plus a variety of other measures to enhance or protect wildlife including man-made badger setts, replacement bat roosts and ‘hop-overs’ to help the bats fly over the new road, a network of 21 ponds to provide new habitats for amphibians and small mammals, new barn owl boxes, and mammal tunnels to provide safe crossings for badgers, hedgehogs, voles and amphibians
- carrying out extensive landscape planting, which will also help support animal and bird habitats, including new species-rich grass, 280 semi-mature trees, around 60,000 whips and saplings, almost 117,000 square metres of shrubs (enough to fill more than 17 football pitches) and more than 7,000 metres of hedgerow with oak, birch, rowan, alder, cherry, crab apple and elm among the species planted
- securing work for around 4,000 people – including 14 apprentices – across a variety of engineering and project management disciplines
- hosting or supporting 100s of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematic days, giving students an insight into engineering
- registering 1.7 million accident-free working hours

The new road, which has already scooped a number of environmental and considerate constructor awards – including a gold award earlier this week – has been delivered as part of the Northern Powerhouse initiative.

## **General enquiries**

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

## **Media enquiries**

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.