

Foreign Secretary's remarks at the Freedom of Religion or Belief Conference

Good Morning,

Ladies and Gentlemen, Excellencies, I'm delighted to welcome you to the Freedom of Religion or Belief conference.

This is the first of its kind to be hosted in the United Kingdom.

I hope there will be many more. I'd like to thank Fiona Bruce for all her hard work as the Prime Minister's Special Envoy and Lord Ahmad as our Minister for Human Rights.

The freedom to believe, to pray and commit acts of worship, or indeed not to believe is a fundamental human freedom and has been one since the dawn of time.

Societies that allow their people to choose what they believe are better, stronger and ultimately more successful.

This fundamental right is covered in the very first clause of Magna Carta and Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It is one of the Four Freedoms Franklin D. Roosevelt said were "essential everywhere in the world".

Yet throughout history, we have seen oppressors crack down on freedom of religion or belief in order to exert control. Whether it the appalling persecution of the Jewish community over centuries or Stalin trying to stamp out religion in the Soviet Union.

Today there is further evidence of this around the world.

In Nigeria, terrorist groups in the North East, including Islamic State West Africa and Boko Haram, indiscriminately attack those who do not subscribe to their extremist views.

Just a month ago, at least 40 people were killed in a heinous attack by gunmen while worshipping at the St Francis Catholic Church in Ondo State.

In Xinjiang, the evidence is clear of the extraordinary scale of China's targeting of Uighur Muslims and other ethnic minorities, including severe restrictions on the freedom of religion.

In Afghanistan, many of those with a belief the Taliban does not condone are forced to follow this in secret or flee for their safety. They also die at the hands of Da'esh, or see their places of worship attacked.

These are a handful of examples. And we know that Hindus, Humanists and many others are prosecuted and persecuted for their beliefs.

Persecution ranges from exclusion and discrimination to forced conversion, destroying places of places of worship and targeted killings.

The Bishop of Truro's 2019 review for the UK Government provided recommendations to support members of all faiths, beliefs and those of no religious belief.

I welcome all of those recommendations, and we have taken forward the 22 in a way that will make a real change for everyone persecuted for their religion or belief.

Over the next two days, we will see people from across the world come together to discuss freedom of religion or belief, and the practical steps we can take to advance it.

Ukraine is on the frontline of this struggle.

They are a free democracy, one of the first countries to join the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, fighting for their future.

Vladimir Putin and his enablers claim that Russia is waging a holy war, but in truth they believe nothing is sacred.

We are seeing growing evidence of heinous war crimes committed by Russian troops.

Innocent civilians are having to shelter from Russia's indiscriminate bombardment in places of worship.

Churches, synagogues, and mosques have been reduced to rubble. Religion is proving to be collateral damage from Putin's aggression.

To Ukraine's delegation in the audience today, I want to say: the UK will not rest until you prevail and until your people are free to live, believe and thrive.

And I can see that sentiment is shared across this conference.

We all want a world where people are free to believe.

That is why since becoming Foreign Secretary I have taken a strong stand against anti-Semitism, condemning the hateful act of terrorism at a Texas synagogue earlier this year.

I continue to stand with our international partners in calling out the shocking persecution of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. I am at the forefront of standing up for all those suffering in Ukraine including Orthodox Christians.

Authoritarians and oppressors feel threatened by the freedom of religion or

belief, fearing it will encourage people to think freely and question their authority.

We cannot allow them to win. That is why we're deepening links with our allies and partners to build a Network of Liberty around the world.

As St Paul told the Corinthians: "Be on guard, stand firm, be courageous, be strong".

So let's work together in that spirit to defend freedom of religion or belief and show the potential for positive change.

Together, we can forge ahead to a fairer, safer world for people of faith across the globe.

Thank you.