

Press release: Universal Periodic Review 33rd session: Minister for Human Rights statement

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a unique process, involving a peer review of the human rights records of all 193 UN member states. It is an important tool of the Human Rights Council (HRC) aimed at sharing best practice. The UK is a strong supporter of the UPR, having spoken at every session and about every country since the process began. During my time as the UK's Human Rights Minister I have prioritised direct ministerial engagement with both the Human Rights Council, and ministerial approvals of the UPR process. This session saw reviews of 14 countries, namely, [Albania](#), [Bhutan](#), [Brunei Darussalam](#), [the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#), [Costa Rica](#), [Côte d'Ivoire](#), [Dominica](#), [Equatorial Guinea](#), [Ethiopia](#), [the Democratic People's Republic of Korea](#), [Nicaragua](#), [Norway](#), [Portugal](#) and [Qatar](#).

Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

Modern slavery and human trafficking is priority for the Prime Minister and a global problem that requires all states to take steps to eradicate. For this reason, the UK raised issues related to modern slavery at every country's UPR during the 33rd session. We commended the proactive steps that many countries are taking to eradicate forced labour, modern slavery, and human trafficking, and made constructive recommendations for every government to drive forward policies that will make the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8.7 a reality. In support of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) 50 for Freedom Campaign, we encouraged countries to ratify the ILO Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, requiring governments to take measures to tackle forced labour in all its forms and provide protection to victims. Through the Call to Action to end Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking, which has now achieved 88 endorsements, the UK continues to advocate for better international coordination to deliver commitments made under SDG 8.7. We will seek new commitments through the G7 and G20, to ensure a coordinated international approach that uses existing UN processes to review progress. The UK will present its very first Voluntary National Review at this year's High-Level Political Forum, which will be an important opportunity to review progress and galvanise government action on this agenda.

Since the 27th session of the UPR, we have made the recommendation to 'adopt an open, merit-based selection process when selecting national candidates for UN Treaty Body elections' to a considerable number of states. These expert bodies are a central part of the UN human rights system, charged with monitoring the implementation of human rights conventions in states which have signed up to them. The UK will continue to advocate strengthening the quality, independence and diversity in Treaty Body membership.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

On the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), I welcome recent successes in bringing perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence to justice, but urge the Government to increase efforts to end impunity for all who commit and direct human rights violations and abuses. I am deeply concerned by restrictions on media freedom and that those exercising freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly are subjected to intimidation, detention and violence and urge the incoming Government to address these as pledged during President Tshisekedi's inaugural address. I also call on the DRC Government to strengthen the capacity and independence of the judicial system to investigate and prosecute perpetrators of sexual and gender based violence, as well as provide effective and necessary support for the victims.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea

I welcome that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) signed up to the joint declaration of commitment for 12 years of quality education for girls in July 2018, and encourage follow up on this commitment. I also note its engagement with the UPR and its recent report under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, I remain deeply concerned by reports of ongoing, widespread and systematic human rights violations in the DPRK. It is unacceptable that citizens face surveillance, imprisonment or even death for their religion or belief. I am also concerned that citizens are not allowed access to independent media or sources of information. I urge the DPRK Government to allow human rights actors immediate and unhindered access to the country.

Brunei

Turning to Brunei, I welcome the assurances given by His Majesty The Sultan, which address concerns about the final phases of the Sharia Penal Code, including the unequivocal decision to outlaw all forms of cruel, inhumane or degrading punishments under any circumstances, through ratifying the UN Convention Against Torture. I also welcome his confirmation that the de facto moratorium on the death penalty will apply to punishments under the new laws. However, I call on Brunei to formally abolish capital punishment and judicial corporal punishments. I also call on Brunei to formalise its commitment to respecting individual human rights, including those of LGBT people.

Nicaragua

On Nicaragua, I regret the suspension of the recently resumed political dialogue. The Government must engage constructively and honour its commitments under the roadmap for dialogue. I acknowledge that the release of some political prisoners was a positive step, however, many remain under house arrest and must be released unconditionally. Moreover, I remain concerned by the repression and the arbitrary use of force against peaceful protesters, journalists and human rights defenders, treatment of political detainees and the disproportionate use of terrorism charges to criminalise dissent. We urge Nicaragua to allow the OHCHR access to the country and to

ensure progress is made on electoral reforms, including the OAS recommendations.

I urge all countries under review during this session to give full and serious consideration to the UK recommendations. I encourage them not only to accept them but to implement all the recommendations in a timely and comprehensive manner. I look forward to the formal UPR adoption at the 42nd session of the UN Human Rights Council in September 2019.

Lord (Tariq) Ahmad, Minister of State for the UN and the Commonwealth, Prime Minister's Special Representative of Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict
Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief.