

Prime Minister's Special Envoy: importance of the international Freedom of Religion or Belief conference in London

Introduction from the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief

Greetings from the UK Parliament. I'm delighted to be speaking to you as the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief. And I'm equally delighted to be able to talk to you about an international ministerial conference which the UK is hosting on 5 and 6 July this year. It's a conference about freedom of religion or belief or 'FoRB' for short.

Why is this conference so important? Well, it's important because all around the world today, even in the 21st century, millions of people are being deprived an education or a job or a home or access to justice or liberty, even to life itself, simply on account of what they believe. And so we're hosting this conference here in the UK so that we can bring together people from around the world to look at how we can address this situation.

We're inviting government ministers. We're inviting faith leaders and representatives. We're inviting civil society activists from around 50 countries from across the globe to come together and not only to discuss the issue of freedom of religion or belief, but also to look at how we can agree some practical solutions to address it.

And I'm pleased to say, too, that we've not just got an official government organised conference with about 500 delegates and will be based in the Queen Elizabeth Conference Centre in the QEII in Parliament Square, but we're also involving civil society grassroots organisations, charities and NGOs concerned about freedom of religion or belief, and they'll be given their own space in the conference centre where they'll be able to host exhibitions and hold their own meetings and sessions.

And so what will the conference involve? Well, we've got sessions across the 2 days looking at, for example, freedom of religion and belief and education. How can we introduce it into education syllabi? So that young people can begin to understand what freedom of religion or belief is and how important it is? We've seen how, for example, they've got hold of the importance of climate change and addressing that. Can we do that in the same way for freedom of religion or belief to help the millions of people around the world who are suffering. Can we see young ambassadors develop so that young people will use social media to champion freedom of religion or belief?

And then we'll have another session on looking at women and girls and how they have a double jeopardy. Often they they are abused because they are

women and girls, but also on account of what their beliefs are, and they're vulnerable. How can we better help them in countries where this is happening?

And then we're going to look at early warning signs. There are early warning signs that happen often when that's the beginning of tension in communities because of differences in views and beliefs, which can then lead to friction, violence, even at worst case. Well, how can countries how can communities start to recognise these early warning signs and address them? And of course, we're bringing people here from across the world because we recognise that no one country, not least the UK, has all the answers.

Only by working together, by collaborating will we be able to begin to start to solve this this growing issue. We're looking at not just governments working together either, but governments working with civil society with organisations going forward, taking forward some really practical suggestions, which we hope will be brought out during those 2 days, and which we can then build on over the months, weeks, years to come.

And in addition to the official 2-day conference there's a lot else going on here in the UK around 5 and 6 July, so that anyone who's not invited to the conference will still be able to join in. We've got dozens and dozens of events focusing on freedom of religion or belief organised by charities, by non-government organisations (NGOs), by civil society activists, not just in London, but around the country.

And to the ministerial conference itself will be livestreamed so that anyone from anywhere in the world will be able to join in and watch and will actually be able to interact, because that will be an opportunity not just for delegates in the conference centre to interact with the sessions and make their contributions and their suggestions known, but also for people to comment virtually from right around the world.

So do join us on 5 and 6 July here in London, the lots of information on the website and by a lot more information coming on over the next few days. And I'm particularly delighted that the UK is hosting this conference this year in 2022 because this year to the UK is the Chair of the International Religious Freedom of Belief Alliance.

What is that Alliance, you may ask? Well, it's an alliance of countries committed to promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief and to preventing its abuses, to working together to do so. It was founded not long ago, in February 2020 with just a handful of countries. It's now grown to 36 countries and more are coming on board.

And I'm pleased that the ministerial is proving a springboard for more interest in the Alliance day by day. And so we hope to see the Alliance grow so that they'll really will be a strong collective global voice of countries who together can have more impact than our individual voices alone.

So I'm looking forward to greeting many of my alliance contacts from around the world who up to date because of the pandemic I've only ever met virtually. This will be an exciting conference. It's exciting for everyone

and there'll be something for everyone. Please do join us on 5 and 6 of July here in London.