

Speech: International Human Rights Day 2017 and the UK's role in promoting human rights

Due to time constraints in the debate, the Minister's speech was curtailed. This is the full version of that speech.

I thank the Rt Hon. Member, the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd MP) for initiating this debate, and I commend her for her work as Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Human Rights. I am grateful for the contributions of other Hon. Members and I will try to respond to all the points raised.

Why human rights matter

It is perhaps trite simply to observe that human rights matter, but human rights do matter because they – and they alone – are guardians of fairness and opportunity for all. They reflect a widespread belief in freedom, in non-discrimination, and in the innate dignity of every human being.

Human rights are more than simply articles of international law – though that in itself would be reason enough to defend them. They also protect collective opportunities and freedoms that are the key to achieving long-term prosperity and security.

UN Declaration on Human Rights

International Human Rights Day commemorates the adoption of the [UN Declaration on Human Rights](#).

That Declaration was signed threescore and 9 years ago last week, by 48 sovereign states, from Britain to Brazil, Chile to China, and India to Iran. Setting aside widespread cultural and historical differences, these countries came together to pledge their support for universal human rights.

The very diversity of the signatories disproves the notion that these rights are a set of values imposed by one part of the world on another. Instead, the Declaration represents a global consensus on the rights and freedoms that everyone should enjoy, wherever they live in the world.

Today, the UK remains as committed as ever to those universal principles, but the rights and freedoms we enjoy here in the UK are not enjoyed everywhere.

Recent events in Burma are only the most recent but shocking reminder of the gulf that continues to exist between the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration and the everyday reality for millions of our fellow humans.

We continue to urge all states to comply with the commitments they have made, not only by endorsing the UN Declaration on Human Rights – but also by ratifying the many fundamental human rights treaties that have evolved in the decades since the Declaration was first adopted. These treaties have codified the principles of the Declaration into international law and hence carry legal obligations.

Human Rights Day

In recognition of the importance of universal human rights to individuals and societies, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office marks International Human Rights Day on 10 December every year.

On that day we customarily reflect on how far the world has come, but we also remember all those whose human rights are still being violated and abused. We pay tribute to the human rights defenders who stand up for them, often at great personal risk, and we renew our determination to support them and to fight for universal rights.

Government policy on human rights

That fight is central to this Government's foreign policy. Indeed it would be unthinkable for UK foreign policy not to have human rights at its core. Promoting and defending human rights is integral to the work of our staff in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

We recognise that all rights set out in the UN Declaration on Human Rights, and in international law, are of equal importance, but to achieve maximum impact we prioritise certain issues. Our current priorities are:

- tackling modern slavery
- defending Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Expression
- ending inequality and discrimination, and
- promoting democracy

I would like to give Hon. Members an insight into some of the FCO's work in each of these key areas.

Tackling modern slavery

Modern slavery is one of the great human rights challenges of our time. It is appalling that it still exists in the 21st Century. Eradicating it, through concerted and coordinated global action is one of our top foreign policy priorities. That is why my Rt. Hon Friend the Prime Minister convened world leaders at the UN General Assembly in September to launch a [call to action to end modern slavery](#). We have also doubled our aid spending on the issue to £150 million, to address the root causes; strengthen law-enforcement capacity in transit countries; and support the victims.

Freedom of religion and belief

Freedom of religion or belief matters – not only because faith guides the daily life of more than 80% of the world’s population. It also matters because promoting tolerance and respect for all helps to build inclusive societies that are more stable, more prosperous, and better able to resist extremism.

We promote and defend it in a variety of ways:

- by directly lobbying governments – as I did, for example, during my recent visit to Pakistan
- by maintaining consensus on the issue through working with international partners (in UN, OSCE, EU), and
- by running projects that promote understanding and respect and celebrate diversity

Many of these projects are run in co-operation with civil society groups – we very much value the role that they and faith leaders play in promoting freedom of religion or belief. My noble Friend, the Minister for Human Rights (Lord Ahmad) and I have stepped up our engagement with them through regular roundtable discussions to seek their views and explore foreign policy issues from different perspectives. We are in close touch with our Embassies and High Commissions about their work to tackle the persecution of Christian, Ahmadiyya and other minorities.

Freedom of expression

The freedom of individuals and organisations to discuss, debate and criticise, or to hold governments to account, is an essential element of a successful society. That is why Freedom of Expression is another universal human right we work hard to uphold. We will be spending [£1 million over the next financial year](#) on projects which promote Freedom of Expression and the work of journalists around the world.

Ending inequality and discrimination

The government believes that all people should be able to live with dignity, free from violence or discrimination, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

At the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, we have renewed our focus on gender, with the [appointment of our first ever Special Envoy on Gender Equality](#). We want to target all forms of violence against women and girls, including sexual violence in conflict, and we want women to be at the heart of conflict resolution.

Through our work on [Women, Peace and Security](#) we are promoting the involvement of women in decision-making and peace building, and ensuring that military, peacekeeping and humanitarian operations take account of women’s needs.

We also promote LGBT equality around the world, and helped set up the Equal Rights Coalition, a group of 35 countries committed to working together on this issue.

People living with disabilities around the world also suffer discrimination. We want to protect their rights and transform their lives. We will be [hosting the first ever Global Disability Summit](#) next year to encourage international action.

Democracy

Last, but by no means least, among our current priorities is the promotion of democracy as the best long term guarantor of stability and prosperity for any society. I am sure our rationale needs no further explanation for this audience.

We work with like-minded partners at home and abroad to support democratic values and protect civil society. We continue to support the work of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (UK) and the International Parliamentary Union in advancing parliamentary democracy and democratic institutions around the world.

We are delighted that the [Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting](#) that we are hosting next year will offer an opportunity to further promote the shared values of human rights, democracy and inclusion that are enshrined in the [Commonwealth Charter](#).

Conclusion

To conclude: in the seventieth year since its adoption, the UN Declaration on Human Rights remains a powerful statement of hope and aspiration for us all. There has been great progress since 1948, but there is still much more to do.

This government will continue to lead the way on promoting human rights, as it always has done, at home and overseas.

We shall stay the course. Our sincere hope is that one day – one Human Rights Day in the future – we can say, once and for all, that human rights are truly enjoyed equally in every corner of the globe by humankind.