

Speech: International Religious Freedom Day

Video message from Human Rights Minister, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon

[International Religious Freedom Day](#)

Introduction

Thank you Jim, and my thanks to you and your APPG colleagues for organising today's event. I want to take this opportunity to pay special tribute to you all for your tireless work in raising awareness of violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief around the world. This awareness is vital in galvanising support for collective action.

I am delighted to be here for the launch of your extremely comprehensive report. The analysis and recommendations it contains will further enrich the Government's understanding and help to inform our approach.

Your invitation recalled the so-called Father of Religious Freedom, Thomas Helwys – a Protestant dissenter in England at the turn of the 17th century. Unlike other reformers, Helwys did not just defend his own religious group. Uniquely for his time, he also defended the rights of others to practice their religion. Indeed he was the first person to write a defence of universal religious freedom in the English language. His experience is a reminder that religious persecution in its different forms has a long history and that this country is no exception. We all know that it continues to this day. It could be dispiriting to dwell on the fact that we are still fighting the same battles 400 years later. However, it is my personal view that this knowledge should in fact galvanise us to be even more determined and activist in defending and protecting the right to freedom of religion or belief in the 21st century. That is what the Government, through the FCO and our posts around the world, is committed to do. I would like to give you a flavour of our work today.

HMG Action

International law and the rules-based international system are fundamental to all our work, and on this issue they could not be clearer.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights sets out the right to choose a religion or belief – or indeed, to have no belief at all – and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights enshrines this right into law, along with guarantees on non-discrimination, equal access to justice and the protection of the law.

Yet despite this clear legal position, people around the world continue to be denied their rights. They suffer prejudice, persecution and physical harm for their faith or belief. We are working hard to tackle this injustice, both

through international institutions and with individual countries.

Multilateral Work

Multilaterally, we work with likeminded partners to build and maintain consensus on the issue of freedom of religion or belief through lobbying other countries and supporting relevant UN resolutions.

Our work on Daesh is a good example of this approach. Daesh is responsible for the appalling persecution of Yezidi, Christian and Mandeian minorities, as well as the majority Muslim population, in Syria and Iraq.

We have been at the forefront of the international campaign to defeat Daesh, joining with others at the UN General Assembly last year to launch a campaign to bring Daesh to Justice. More recently, we drafted a ground-breaking UN resolution that will ensure Daesh's crimes do not go unpunished. The resolution will send a UN-led investigative team to Iraq to assist with the vital work of gathering evidence of Daesh atrocities and help Iraq to bring Daesh to justice. The UK has contributed one million pounds to get this team up and running.

We will continue to work with the Iraqi Government, the UN and the international community to deliver justice; to promote the rights of all minorities; and to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches those in greatest need.

Bilateral Work

We also use our extensive diplomatic network to engage with countries individually. In Bangladesh, where the Ahmadi community faces significant persecution, I visited their Mosque in Dhaka and made a call for religious tolerance.

In Russia, following the Supreme Court's ban on Jehovah's Witnesses as 'extremists', we continue to call on the state to uphold religious freedom.

In Eritrea, we have called on the Government to release all prisoners detained without due process, including the Orthodox Patriarch, Abune Antonios, and others detained for their religious beliefs.

We remain deeply concerned by violence against Christians and Muslims in Burma, and particularly the Rohingya in Rakhine State. We have been active on this issue for some time. Successive Ministers, including my predecessor Baroness Anelay last year, the Foreign Secretary in January, and my Rt Hon Friend the Minister for Asia Mark Field last month – have met Burmese community leaders to listen to their views and encourage greater tolerance.

We also continue to press for religious freedoms in Iran. Members of the Baha'i community recently expressed their thanks for our lobbying work which they said had played a significant role in the release of Mahvash Sabet. I am pleased to be addressing a Parliamentary seminar organised by the UK Baha'I community next month.

Programme Work

Projects that directly support freedom of religion or belief remain an important element of our Magna Carta Fund human rights programme. One project that we are particularly proud of is helping secondary school teachers in the Middle East and North Africa to create lesson plans that promote tolerance and freedom of religion or belief.

Report Recommendations

Before I finish I would like to address one of the recommendations of the report that relates directly to our work: That UK government staff should have an extensive knowledge and understanding of religion and Freedom of Religion or Belief.

I agree and indeed we have for several years been running religious literacy training to enhance the expertise of our staff. We recently launched our re-designed 'Religion and Diplomacy' course in association with LSE Faith Centre. We strongly encourage FCO staff to participate, and we also open it up to those in other government departments who are working on similar issues. Feedback from recent participants has been overwhelmingly positive. We will continue to review the course to ensure it is as effective as possible.

We have also developed detailed guidance for our staff – a 'toolkit' in Whitehall jargon – something that we regularly promote to ensure that staff are making the most of it. There is always room for improvement, and in this as in other areas we continually strive to enhance our corporate expertise.

Working with Civil Society

We agree, that engagement with government and non-governmental actors working on country-specific issues is important for advancing freedom of religion or belief. That is why Ministers and officials regularly meet with faith actors and civil society to discuss areas of concern and identify ways to address them.

I want to take this further. That is why we are developing a new strategy to increase this engagement across our network. Just a few days ago, I held the first in a series of roundtables with faith representatives. We had useful discussions on Burma, on freedom of religion or belief more generally, and on how we can work together in the future. This new initiative provides a powerful platform for an exchange of views from faith perspectives, an opportunity to champion the rights and causes of others, as Thomas Helwys did. There is no greater example of the positive power of faith than when we speak out with one voice in defence of our common humanity. If I as a Muslim speak out for a Hindu. If Elizabeth as a Christian speaks out Sikh. As we look across this great and diverse city of London, we see churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and other buildings of religious worship. The modern tapestry that defines the UK today rests on the values of humanity that all faiths share.

Conclusion

I am going to hand over to Baroness Berridge in a moment. I will conclude by thanking the APPG once again for their report. We will consider its recommendations carefully and look forward to continuing to strengthen our collaboration and partnership with you in this regard.

As Minister for Human Rights, and as a man of faith, I give my personal commitment to work tirelessly to promote and defend freedom of religion or belief for everyone, everywhere.