

Speech: Lord Ahmad addresses 40th Session of the UN Human Rights Council

Mr President, (High Commissioner), Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen. It is, as ever, an honour to address you today.

In an ideal world, we would not need this Council. In an ideal world, states would meet the human rights obligations they have to their people. States and non-state actors would not abuse the vulnerable, persecute certain communities, or silence those who speak out. In an ideal world, those who did such despicable things would face justice. Sadly, we do not yet live in an ideal world. That is why this Council is so important, and why the UK is and will continue to be one of its most steadfast supporters.

We support the Council's work because, in addition to the obvious moral argument for standing up for the oppressed, we also believe that States that respect human rights create the conditions for societies that are more secure, more prosperous and better equipped to meet the needs of their people.

Yet the challenges the Council faces are many and complex. If it is to rise to those challenges we must work together to strengthen it. Its success depends on all of us. We must ensure that the Council is not only more vocal and more ambitious, but also more proactive. We must not only tackle the most pressing human rights issues of today, but also work to prevent those of tomorrow.

My government is determined to do just that, and this year we are focusing particular attention on three human rights issues: freedom of the media, freedom of religion, and preventing sexual violence in conflict.

Mr President, media freedom plays an essential role in protecting all other human rights and freedoms. A free media helps people form their own opinions, and it holds governments and corporations to account. It is a vital foundation for any healthy democracy. That is why journalists should be free to do their jobs without fearing for their safety. Yet in many parts of the world, the statistics tell another story. Indeed, according to Reporters Without Borders, 2018 was the most dangerous year on record to be a journalist. 80 were murdered, 348 imprisoned and a further 60 taken hostage.

That is why, this year, the UK has launched a campaign to champion media freedom. We want the world to know that journalism is not a crime. On the contrary, media freedom is an essential element of the human right of freedom of expression.

Our campaign will advocate for the benefits of a free media; it will generate international support for the protection of journalists; and it will press for legislation to protect media freedom, not constrain it. The centrepiece of this campaign will be an ambitious international conference in London on

10 and 11 July. We will bring together journalists, civil society and governments from around the world to highlight the urgency of the issue, mobilise a global consensus and share best practice.

On behalf of our co-hosts, the Government of Canada, and ourselves, I would like to take this opportunity to invite all Foreign Ministers from this Council to attend. We look forward to working with you to champion this vital human right.

The UK's second major human rights focus this year is Freedom of Religion or Belief. We have long worked to defend and promote the rights of those of all faiths, and none, and we continue to do so. We are deeply concerned about the persecution of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, the prosecutions of Baha'i in Yemen, and we echo the concerns expressed by the High Commissioner recently about the criminalisation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. We hope to see Iraq doing more to protect its minority communities and promote community cohesion.

We recognise that Christian communities worldwide have faced particularly aggressive persecution in recent years. That is why we have launched an independent review into this specific issue, to ensure that we are doing as much as we can to respond. Just last week during a visit to Pakistan I heard from Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus and Christians about the discrimination they face on a daily basis. While we remain concerned about restrictions on freedom of religion and belief in Pakistan, I was encouraged by the Government's plans.

Our third major human rights focus this year will be preventing sexual violence in conflict. This is an issue on which the UK has shown global leadership and in which we have seen significant progress, but there is still more to do. In November this year, five years on from our Global Summit in 2014, we will be hosting a major follow-up event to galvanise the international community into further action. I hope you will join us.

Mr President, in addition to these three key focus areas, the United Kingdom remains deeply concerned about the serious human rights situation in a number of countries.

In Syria, human rights are still being systematically violated on a daily basis. Thousands of peaceful activists are still in regime detention, exposed to appalling abuse torture, sexual violence and execution. And when I was in Iraq last year I heard first-hand from Syrian women that they had suffered harrowing sexual violence. This Council must do all it can to ensure that those responsible for these crimes are held accountable.

In Burma too, there must be genuine accountability for the crimes committed against the Rohingya and other ethnic groups by members of the Burmese military, crimes highlighted by the Fact Finding Mission.

It is to this Council's great credit that it recognised the gravity of the issue and established a mechanism to collect and preserve evidence for future prosecutions. I am proud of the role the UK played in securing that mandate. It is now essential that the mechanism gets the tools and access it needs to

carry out its vital work and that the Burmese government cooperates with it fully.

In North Korea, despite some welcome signs on the political track, there has been no improvement in the human rights situation. North Korea is still top of both the Global Slavery Index and the Open Doors World Watch List of countries where Christians face the most severe persecution. People are not free to practice religion. Their freedom of expression is severely restricted and they cannot access the world's media. I once again call on the North Korean authorities to work with the Council and other human rights actors to end widespread human rights violations.

In South Sudan, the human rights situation remains dire, and is exacerbated by persistent conflict and a worsening humanitarian situation. The UK welcomes the peace agreement, but we will continue to press, at the highest levels, for all parties to implement fully the commitments they have made to protect the rights and freedoms of the people of South Sudan.

Elsewhere, we remain concerned about instability and insecurity in Libya that is exacerbating the poor human rights situation. In Iran human rights defenders are still being harassed and arbitrarily detained, and detainees are denied the right to fair trials.

In Iraq, their next National Action Plan must properly address the impact of Daesh on women and children. And in Cameroon the cycle of violence in Anglophone regions must end.

Finally, to end on a more positive note, we welcome the decision of the Government of Sri Lanka to return more land to its people, and to establish an Office for Reparations and we encourage them to implement in full the commitments made to this Council to secure long-term reconciliation.

Mr President, to conclude: The UK remains committed to strengthening human rights, both at home and abroad. We remain committed to justice, accountability, and the rules based international system. And we remain committed to this Council. That is why we are seeking re-election next year, for the 2021-2023 term. And it is why we will continue to speak up for the oppressed and the persecuted... to champion freedom of the media, freedom of religion or belief and an end to sexual violence....

And it is why we will continue to stand up for human rights, for freedom and for justice – for everyone, everywhere.

Thank you Mr President.