

Speech: Lord Ahmad addresses Amnesty International

Good afternoon Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests, friends and colleagues – and indeed I see many familiar faces from both Houses of Parliament around the room – Ann Clwyd who as Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Human Rights Group has worked tirelessly to advance human rights; my predecessor Baroness Anelay, who was strongly committed to this area of work. I am pleased to see many colleagues from the House of Lords, who consistently hold me and this Government to account on this critical agenda.

I would like to start by thanking the All Party Parliamentary Group on Human Rights and Amnesty International for organising today's event, and for all the valuable work they do, including highlighting the important role of Human Rights Defenders.

I would also like to thank Amnesty International and many of you here who have helped us revise the guidance for our diplomats. Our diplomats play a key role across the world and by supporting human rights defenders, especially many tragically facing prejudice and oppression in their front line work, it is important the British Government, wherever we have representation in the world is a voice advocating for those human rights defenders.

Let me assure you that that guidance has now issued to our staff around the world, and will inform their work in 2018 – the year which marks the 20th Anniversary of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

And in that context, next year I am also mindful of the fact that that the UK will host the Commonwealth Summit Heads of Government meeting. Working through the agenda with the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and indeed across government, we want to ensure that whilst there will be challenges, we bridge those challenges, as we see 52 Heads of Government assemble right here in London.

I know we are today joined by many human rights defenders and advocates, brave and courageous people who defend human rights across the world. We are joined by Issa Amro, whose work as a human rights defender in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is well known to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Issa, I know you have recently discussed your experiences with my colleague Alistair Burt, our Minister for the Middle East.

Human Rights Defenders – UK Support

I am sure no one here underestimates the contribution of brave human rights defenders like Issa and others who are advancing human rights internationally.

By speaking truth to power and helping individuals understand and exercise their rights, they act as custodians, guardians of our freedoms, our democracies, and of good governance. But they are also acting because it is the right thing to do.

And it is a tragedy, ladies and gentlemen that these very same people frequently come under attack. Unsurprising, they come under attack from the very powerful voices those seeking to protect their own influence, to whom human rights are an obstacle and an inconvenience, not something every citizen should enjoy.

This is why our government, why the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, champions human rights defenders around the world. This year we have been working to uphold and strengthen the protections afforded to them by the international human rights system. Just last month we helped forge consensus on a UN General Assembly Resolution on Human Rights Defenders. Indeed only yesterday I returned from Geneva where the UK supported a Special Session of the Human Rights Council on the plight of the Rohingya .

As part of our commitment to human rights defenders, the UK is a powerful advocate of journalists and programmes to build their capacity. That's why ladies and gentlemen on the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists in November, our Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson committed to spending £1 million over the next financial year on projects that will enable journalists and media professionals to promote their own free press and uphold human rights. And let me be clear, this is one area amongst others prioritised by our Secretary of State. He talks very passionately about human rights, in particular the issues of press freedoms and protection of journalists, and LGBT rights, all of which are very close to the Foreign Secretary's heart.

Write for Rights Campaign – Detentions in Turkey

Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign is another powerful way in which we can support those whose basic human rights are under attack. This year's campaign is particularly poignant. As we stand here today, Amnesty International Country Chair Mr Tanner Kilic – who has worked tirelessly to defend the rights of others – remains behind bars in Turkey.

The UK Government is deeply concerned by these detentions in Turkey. But let me assure you, the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, Home Secretary and Ministers have all raised the issue with their Turkish counterparts. We continue to encourage Turkey to work towards the full protection of fundamental rights for everyone, particularly with regard to free speech.

The Write for Rights campaign again shows us that human rights defenders have their rights violated all too often:

In China – Ni Yulan has been harassed and attacked for supporting people faced with forced evictions. We have raised her case with China on numerous occasions and continue to be concerned about her treatment. I again urge the Chinese authorities to ensure that Ni and her family are free from

harassment; and that she is able to access the medical treatment she needs.

In Egypt – Human Rights Defenders like Azza Soliman and Ibrahim Metwally face arrest and mistreatment, and are subjected to asset freezes and travel bans. We continue to raise our human rights concerns privately with the Egyptian authorities, but also let me assure you in public, including at the UN. On 3 November our joint statement with Canada, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands set out our concerns about the detention of Ibrahim Metwally.

In Bangladesh, human rights defenders – and I talked to some of you before we got going this afternoon – like the LGBT activist Xulhaz Manan have been attacked for their campaigning, as I heard during my visit in August. This is why Bangladesh remains a human rights priority country for the UK and why we raise our concerns at all levels with the government there.

Standing up for human rights defenders is a regular part of the work of so many of our Embassies as I have already said. Let me take this opportunity to highlight the work that two of them are currently doing.

In Bogota, our Embassy lobbies on behalf of many individual human rights defenders, and we coordinate the work of other concerned members of the international community.

This year, David Ravelo, Huber Ballesteros and Miguel Beltran were released from prison, and we have helped ensure their personal safety on release.

The Embassy also funds a project that is developing self-protection strategies for social leaders in the regions of Colombia most affected by conflict.

In Bangkok, Thailand our Ambassador and his team worked closely with partner countries to support three human rights defenders who on 26 July 2016 were charged with criminal defamation for reporting allegations of torture.

The Embassy stood by them in public and importantly in private to provide the support they needed. We took to social media to say that it is not a crime to report torture. We used our contacts to raise the case in a range of forums and thankfully, on 24 October this year the charges were dropped.

Ladies and gentlemen, these are but two examples. I am proud to say that there are many more. Indeed in virtually every country with human rights challenges you will find that our Head of Mission is in contact with the main civil society actors and leading human rights defenders, and of course the governments themselves, promoting the importance of the work of human rights defenders and defending their right to carry it out.

Conclusion

If I may in conclusion, I would like to end by directly addressing individuals in this room and beyond. Selfless individuals around the world who are willing to speak out and be counted, who are willing to speak out and defend the human rights of others, who are willing to speak out and stand up often at the risk of their own safety or freedom.

Your and their courage and commitment are a shining example to us all. Sometimes you speak for those with no voice and give them that voice. You stand up for the downtrodden; you bring us a step closer to freedom, equality, and justice. Therefore we not only commend you, we salute you. From my heart and on behalf of the Government we thank you. And let me assure you ladies and gentlemen, wherever, whenever we can, Her Majesty's Government will continue to stand with human rights defenders in solidarity.