

Speech: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon's speech at the launch of the 2016 Annual Human Rights Report

Thank you Richard.

Excellencies, Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, colleagues, welcome to the launch of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Human Rights Report for 2016. It is a great pleasure to see friends and colleagues who I have worked alongside for many years. It is always a moment of trepidation to see a former boss sitting in the front row. I look forward to working with Sir Eric Pickles on the important issue of tackling anti-Semitism, which remains a clear priority for this Government.

Promoting and protecting human rights and individual freedoms is a priority for this Government, our Prime Minister and for me personally.

I was greatly honoured to be appointed by Prime Minister Theresa May in June as Foreign and Commonwealth Minister with responsibility for Human Rights, as well as the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict. I pay tribute to my predecessor Baroness Anelay for her sterling work on these agendas.

Human rights are at the heart of our work here at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, be it at home or abroad. Our Annual Report reviews our progress in promoting and protecting human rights over the last 12 months, and highlights some of our successes. It shows that, thanks to our work with international organisations such as the UN and the Commonwealth, as well as with countries from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, the United Kingdom has been instrumental in bringing about real change.

Today I would like to set out our priorities for the year ahead. But first I want to say a few words about how we approach our human rights work.

Working internationally

Working internationally is absolutely vital. The challenges are immense, as our Annual Report clearly shows. That is why we work closely with our international partners to coordinate our efforts and maximise our impact.

As Minister for the Commonwealth, I am committed to working through that institution and within our diverse family of nations to share best practice, build capacity and make the Commonwealth a relevant and revitalised institution with real world impact. Next April's Summit in London will be a key opportunity to take stock of our achievements and together – all of us – build a vision to take the organisation forward.

As Minister for the United Nations, I will ensure that we continue to use our

membership on the UN Human Rights Council to speak out about human rights violations around the world, and to take the lead on resolutions such as the one condemning human rights violations and abuses in Syria.

We will continue to work with our European partners – and aim to enjoy a deep and special partnership with the European Union once we leave. Our vote to leave the European Union was in no way a rejection of the values we share. Our departure will, as the Prime Minister has said, see us become even more global and internationalist in action and in spirit.

Let me turn now to several priority areas that I will be pursuing in my new role.

Modern Slavery

The first is modern slavery. There are currently thought to be around 46 million victims of this evil trade worldwide. It is an illegal industry – if you can call it such – which generates profits of some \$150 billion per year – bigger than the entire US banking sector.

But there are practical things we can do. In my visit to Ghana last week, I met the young gentleman James Kofi Annan, a former child slave. I was deeply disturbed to hear of the horrors experienced by victims of child exploitation in the fishing industry, and as a father of three, it hits home in a very personal way. James was sold by his own family into slavery as a child fisherman age six. For the seven years that followed, he worked everyday from 8am to 3am. He was tortured and abused, but considers himself to be one of the lucky ones to survive this ordeal. James founded and now runs Challenging Heights, an NGO dedicated to preventing child trafficking, reducing child slavery and promoting children's rights.

Having heard James' harrowing story, I was pleased to have the opportunity to meet with the Minister for Gender, Children and Social Protection, to find out more about the steps Ghana is taking to address both the criminal activity and poverty that drives this awful crime. It is a testament to the constructive approach Ghana is taking that James – a former child slave who has suffered such terrible abuse – was able to sit alongside representatives of other NGOs across the table from the Minister and participate in the discussion. We want to see that constructive engagement with civil society in every country, and will continue to be vocal in encouraging it.

More than 200 years ago, fellow Wimbledonian William Wilberforce took a courageous stand to lead Britain in the fight against slavery. Today we require that same level of strength, courage and commitment to root out and bring to justice the present day human traffickers and slave drivers that continue to exploit and abuse some of the most vulnerable in our society.

As you will know, ending modern slavery is an issue also close to our Prime Minister's heart. She championed it as Home Secretary, and oversaw the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act in 2015, a major step forward. Working with international partners, our goal is to end this modern slavery by 2030. We are leading the way and I am proud to serve on the Prime Minister's

Implementation Task Force, as we seek to build an international coalition and cooperation to drive global change on this issue.

I am also pleased to be leading the work of the dedicated Modern Slavery Unit here at the Foreign Office, as part of a cross Whitehall campaign. Our global network has a vital role to play in translating political will into practical action on the ground, much like I saw in Ghana. I was able to brief our heads of mission on our high level of ambition when they returned to London for Leadership Conference earlier this month.

FoRB

The second area, and one that is a personal priority for me, is our work on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). As the Prime Minister said at a 10 Downing Street reception earlier this year, "We must reaffirm our determination to stand up for people of all religions to practice their beliefs in peace and safety". Working in collaboration with faith leaders is key to this effort, and I am delighted His Grace Bishop Angaelos has joined us on today's panel to speak about his work in this area.

The Report describes our diplomatic efforts to safeguard Freedom of Religion or Belief for Rohingya Muslims and Christians in Burma, Ahmadiyya Muslims and Christians in Pakistan, people of the Baha'i faith in Iran, as well as faith groups in other countries, be it China, Russia, Indonesia or Sudan, to name a few.

The report also highlights our groundbreaking conference last year, which explored how inclusive societies could build resilience against violent extremism. Building on that strong foundation, I want to take a fresh look at how the UK can lead internationally on these two mutually enforcing areas of work. I want to ensure that we stand up not just against persecution, but to secure full respect for the human and citizen rights of minority communities around the world.

Women and Girls' Rights

Turning to the rights of women and girls, improving gender equality internationally is high on the Foreign Secretary's agenda, and indeed it is high on mine too. The Foreign Secretary's commitment was demonstrated most recently by his appointment of Joanna Roper as his first Special Envoy for Gender Equality. We want to help bring an end to violence and discrimination and to ensure women and girls everywhere around the world enjoy equal opportunities. I will be working closely with Joanna in the coming months in pursuit of that objective.

The scale of challenge is huge. Our Report shows that 31 million girls of primary school age have never been to school. One in three women around the world suffer violence or sexual abuse in their lifetime. 200 million women have undergone genital mutilation. These statistics are frankly appalling. Women and girls suffer both immediate and long-term effects, and this is to the great detriment of the whole of society.

I was hugely honoured and humbled to be appointed as the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict and in this role, will be working hard to promote our campaign to end the stigma associated with sexual violence. After the trauma of sexual violence, survivors face the equal horror of rejection by those they rely on most for support in their rehabilitation. This must change. I will present our new 'Principles for Global Action' at the UN General Assembly, and will call upon the international community to join our campaign.

LGBT

I've already talked about our work to end discrimination and persecution based on faith and gender, but our work on equalities also extends to the important issue of protecting and promoting the rights of LGBT communities. Around the world, 72 countries continue to criminalise consensual same sex relations. Our Report outlines the United Kingdom's efforts to support the legal, cultural and social change required to make LGBT equality a reality the world over. We will continue to stand up for LGBT rights – as the Foreign Secretary did recently in response to the persecution of LGBT people in Chechnya.

FCO Human Rights Programme Funds

Lobbying and advocacy on human rights are the bread and butter of what our diplomats do, but our efforts are also backed up by financial assistance. In 2016 the Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy and the new Rules-Based International System Fund were worth over £20 million overall. They supported over 160 projects in more than 80 countries. The Report describes projects in some of our 30 human rights priority countries.

That list of priority countries remains under constant review as we seek to target our human rights efforts most effectively in a changing world, but we continue to believe long term, constructive engagement to offer the best chance of success across the board.

Conclusion

I hope that what I have said today reassures you that the Government stands with you in your efforts, and that the United Kingdom will remain a committed, consistent and passionate advocate for universal human rights. We need to build upon our work and become bolder and stronger, not just in condemning abuse and disregard for human rights, but calling for the principles of absolute justice, as we seek to protect, promote and strengthen the rights of all communities, wherever they may be in the world. Sometimes this will be best achieved by publicly calling out flagrant abuses of human rights; other times firm and clear private messaging will be the most effective method to achieve our aims. On other occasions, it will be a blend of both. But most important and critical to this work is your partnership, your advice, your thoughts, ideas and reactions to the report. I look forward to collaborating with you, as we strive to change the world for the better, for everyone. Thank you.

Further information