

Speech: Lord Ahmad Speech at Amnesty International Annual Human Rights Day Reception

To my lords, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon and welcome. I wish to thank Mr Speaker for allowing Amnesty to host this event, but also thank Kate and her team for organising the event today and to thank you for all you do; not just holding the government to account, because that is an important role, but equally for your dedication and devotion to this important agenda of Human Rights.

I am also delighted, as I came in I had a chance to speak to some students from Hillview School in Kent – and I understand their member of parliament has just arrived, Tom Tugendhat – talking of holding people to account, as you many of you know, he is the chair of the foreign affairs committee, so I assure you it is not just the members of the opposition who hold the government to account, but the work of our committees do. Particularly in my case as a Foreign Office Minister, the foreign affairs committee, assuring that we do stick to our principles, we do deliver upon our policies and our commitments.

The area of Human Rights is something I believe in very passionately and take very seriously, and therefore not withstanding other events – and there are a few others going on today – it is important that we show our commitment, not just through events like this, but through collaborative and collective action on this important agenda. It should not matter who you are, where you are, what country, what age, what gender, what faith, what creed, what colour – no matter who you are, wherever you are our collective responsibility on this important agenda is clear.

Therefore, I am delighted to support, amongst other human rights defender organisations, the sterling work done by Amnesty International around the world, and Kate, thank you for this opportunity to allow me to come and share some of my thoughts.

As I was walking over from the Foreign Office, there were many colours, there were many voices, there were many placards, and there were many views. But, as I reflected on this particular event, I am proud of the fact that those freedoms that we take sometimes for granted, are very apparent today amongst all days. It is important that we should respect, regard, protect and indeed strengthen those freedoms, not just here in the UK but around the world.

I am proud of the fact that we have passionate political debates on important issues of the day – not just in parliament, but around the country; on the streets, through our newspapers and press and indeed, as I know clearly from my own children – as my 13 year old or coming on to 35, keeps reminding me of her human rights – it is an important element that we continue to discuss these issues within our own homes.

But you know my lords, ladies and gentlemen, it is a cherished freedom. It is right we cherish it, but that we also stand up for those who are denied these freedoms – for which it is just a distant dream. For them, disagreeing with the government is not just difficult; it is dangerous – indeed, in parts of the world, tragically it is deadly.

Threats to Human Rights Defenders

Indeed, as we look at 70 years on from the Human Rights declaration, there are 300 Human Rights Defenders have been murdered this year alone. Why? For defending the human rights of others – that is crucial. That is 300 families shattered. 300 communities shocked and living in fear. And many thousands of ordinary people robbed of a brave and committed advocates, close friends and family.

For every one of those killed, there are many, many more thousands locked up, attacked and threatened.

Early this week, and I was delighted Kate Allen was there as well – both of us heard directly from two Human Rights Defenders; one from Kenya Wanjeri Nderu and Dina Meza from Honduras. It is was important as we marked that particular day that we should not forget the mental harm that is often done, the abuse Human Rights Defenders suffer, because they can be as damaging – those psychological wounds – as a physical one.

UK support of Human Rights Defenders

These incredibly courageous people – I salute them and look up to them – put themselves at risk to defend the rights that matter to us all, and that is why, here at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, I and others that work with me make it a priority that we put human rights and Human Rights Defenders at the heart of our work. We learn from them. We not only advocate for them, we seek to also protect and strengthen the work they do – we must continue to strengthen the work we do in this area.

We work with Human Rights Defenders on our campaigns, be it to end modern slavery which our Prime Minister, Mrs May has championed around the world, that scourge and crime of human trafficking; and as I know as her representative on preventing sexual violence in conflict, and I know again, talking to the students from Hillview, the importance of girl's education – that is why, amongst other things, I am proud of our government's collective shared commitment to ensure that every girl, no matter where they are around the world, receives 12 years of quality education – it is only through education that we will empower girls. Human Rights Defenders are essential to our work to promote good governance, media freedom, to deliver equality; whether it be gender or LGBT equality; and importantly to end the death penalty and torture.

I also, through my travels, meet many dedicated Human Rights Defenders, many of whom are faith leaders and faith communities on the front line. In the summer, I was honoured and humbled to be asked by our prime minister to also take on the additional role as her Special Envoy on the important issue of

Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Over the past year, I have done this on many occasions during overseas visits, including in Iraq, Algeria, Egypt and Indonesia, to name but a few. It is so important, as we are defending the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief, we should not do so alone; it is the responsibility of us collectively, to promote and respect those who hold different religious beliefs, or no religious beliefs whatsoever, but collectively stand up for their right to do just that – not just internationally, but when we see challenges at home, we should stand up. As we approach Christmas in a year of goodwill – good to remember at this particular time. It is important that we do, and it is an area that I have been looking at very closely, and as we look at Freedom of Religion or Belief, we also recognise that there are many people, because of their Christian faith around the world who won't be able to celebrate, who will not be able to have the family dinners, who will not be able to go to church to worship in the way they wish to do – a poignant moment to reflect on.

Tribute to NGOs

But we do value our engagement with organisations such as Amnesty and the many other human rights NGOs that share common aims and aspirations.

I should like to take this opportunity, if I may, to pay tribute to the work of Amnesty International in particular and other NGOs present here: because it is you who give a voice to those who are unheard; it is you who stand up for those who are knocked down; and, crucially, it is you who defend those who risk their lives to defend others. Simply put, thank you, for everything you do.

If anyone were in any doubt as to whether defending human rights was truly a global issue, I would suggest – if you haven't do so already – is to read Amnesty's report, which as I admitted to Kate I had when I saw her on Monday that I had just received and not yet read, but I have now, which details how their "Write for Rights" campaign has led to 5.5 million actions, in 208 countries and territories around the world.

In conclusion ladies and gentlemen, it is a great honour to be here with you this afternoon, but it goes without saying that the issue of human rights and Human Rights Defenders is significant. The challenges that Human Rights Defenders face around the world are widespread, but they can only be tackled effectively through working together on a global scale.

So as we mark that 70 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, on this Human Rights Day let us pay tribute, let us remember and those who have a faith let us pray for those brave Human Rights Defenders around the world, let us pay tribute to their courage, their incredible vision and tenacity, and ultimately let us commit to work together, even more closely than we have already, to ensure we play our part in helping them to deliver the change we all want to see. Thank you.