

Speech: Lord Ahmad's Human Rights speech

Introduction

Your Excellencies, Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, colleagues from across government. Welcome to the launch of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Human Rights Report for 2017.

As the FCO Minister with responsibility for Human Rights and Modern Slavery, as well as the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict, and also recently I was delighted and greatly honoured and humbled to be appointed as the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, it has been a great honour to lead the FCO's human rights diplomacy during the course of the last year.

Ladies and gentlemen, our human rights are inseparable from our condition as human beings.

Promoting and protecting those rights, and standing up for the inherent dignity of individuals around the world, is a fundamental part of the British foreign policy. Indeed, a foreign policy that does not have human rights at its core is unimaginable.

Our annual Human Rights Report is a snap shot of that work and indeed the human rights situation around the world in 2017. This report documents just some of the many human rights violations and abuses that took place in many countries during the course of 2017. The report also details many examples of the incredible and tireless work which the Government, together with many in this room and beyond, are doing on a daily basis across the world to advance the cause of universal human rights.

International efforts

Standing up for human rights be it at home or around the world is not only the right thing to do, it is also part of our strategy for creating a more secure and prosperous world. We do this in a variety of ways. At times, it's quiet diplomacy and discussions, at other times, rightly so, it's leading campaigns on the international stage.

The report, which you have in front of you, contains examples of our diplomatic achievements over the past year. Of course, there is much still to be done, and it will take a sustained and collaborative effort to overcome the many challenges that lie ahead. You only have to cast your eye around the world to realise that.

And that is why our work with international partners to co-ordinate our efforts and maximise our impact is very important. I assure you, as Minister of State for both the United Nations and the Commonwealth, I am acutely aware of the need to promote and protect human rights on the international stage.

If I may, turning firstly, as members of the UN Security Council and indeed one of the permanent five members of the Security Council, the United Kingdom continues to speak out against human rights violations and has taken the lead on resolutions, such as many have seen with the abuses against and the tragic plight of Rohingya Muslims in Burma.

We also work very closely with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and indeed the Council of Europe. These organisations also play an important role in upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms, and promoting universal values such as tolerance and respect.

Human Rights also played a very large part in discussions at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting held here in London in April. During the summit the UK announced over £20 million of funding for a range of projects aimed at promoting human rights and democracy around the world. From tackling important issues such as child labour and online sexual exploitation, to protecting the rights of women and LGBT community, and a programme to drive more inclusive and accountable democracy.

Many of you know that the government has also committed £212 million through DFID's Girls' Education Challenge, to help over 1 million girls receive at least 12 years of quality education in developing countries across the Commonwealth. And when we talk about Girls' Education, it's important that we use the word quality education, because it's quality education that really empowers those girls. We also fund human rights projects in countries around the world through the Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy. And this year the £11.1 million fund allowed us to support over 100 human rights projects, many of them implemented by many in this room, by human rights defenders and civil society organisations. An overview of the way the fund, the Magna Carta Fund, was used in 2017 is also contained within the report.

Human rights priorities

Amongst other priority areas, the report updates on our work to tackle modern slavery. Many of you will know that this is a priority for Mrs May, our Prime Minister. Following the Prime Minister's lead, and working across government, we have been raising the profile of this heinous crime around the world. Galvanising greater political will, and prompting stronger action by many states and institutions.

Thanks largely to our diplomatic efforts at the FCO, working together with colleagues at the Home Office and DFID staff, 63 countries have now endorsed the Call to Action to End Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking, an initiative that was launched less than a year ago by our Prime Minister at the UN General Assembly.

The Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative also remains a key priority for our Government, and as the Prime Minister's Special Representative on this issue, I have made it a priority for myself. I have visited various parts of the world including Iraq. And only last week I visited Kosovo and nothing can move you more than sitting down and hearing directly the testimonies of those incredible, courageous survivors who

themselves have become the most powerful advocates in tackling sexual violence.

The United Kingdom is determined to end the stigma suffered by survivors. How can it be right that those that have suffered such crimes against themselves are rejected often by families, communities and by their own faith groups? At a time when they need compassion and support, they face rejection. Therefore the UK is determined to prioritise the tackling of stigma. I commend and indeed I am greatly heartened by the support I have received from many faith leaders in support of this noble objective. We will continue to call on the international community to join our campaign, and sign up to the UK's Principles for Global Action.

Four years on from the Global Summit where PSVI was launched by the then Foreign Secretary William Hague, , it is important that we must redouble our efforts to reduce stigma; improve justice for survivors, a key priority as I said for myself on my visit to Iraq; and work to prevent sexual violence in conflict once and for all. We have seen it unravelling in Burma: women, children, young girls and yes young boys as well, falling victim. It is that kind of violence we must call for an end for. In doing so, we must ensure justice and accountability: Accountability for the perpetrators, justice for the survivors.

So I am therefore delighted that next year the UK will be hosting an international meeting in 2019 to take stock of the progress that has been made, mark the successes, identify new areas of focus, and to stimulate the international community into further action on this important priority.

Freedom of Religion or Belief

I mentioned a few moments ago about my deployment as the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The freedom to practice a faith, the freedom to change one's faith, the freedom to hold a faith or no faith at all is a universal human right of itself. It is associated closely with other human rights, such as the rights to freedom of expression and association. In addition, where freedom of religion or belief is violated, it is quite often the case, indeed evidence suggests, other human rights are often curtailed too. It's how that first discrimination then turns to persecution, that persecution turns to violence and worst still.

It is clearly unacceptable that an estimated 75% of the world's population live in countries whose administrations and governments severely restrict freedom of religion or belief. It is also equally unacceptable that millions of people around the world suffer persecution and direct discrimination and worse, often at the hands of fellow citizens, whilst state authorities stand idly by – failing to honour the very obligations they have committed to, to protect the human rights of all people within their jurisdiction.

Over the last year in my role as Minister for Human Rights, I have visited many countries to promote freedom of religion or belief. I have again, as

with the victims and survivors of sexual violence, heard some incredible and courageous stories, moving stories, from the victims of religious persecution and those working to protect them. As I said already, I visited Iraq a few months ago. There, ladies and gentlemen, I met directly with survivors and representatives of the Yezidi communities. The atrocities that I heard about, the way mothers had to face up to not just sexual violence, but the dehumanisation of themselves and their children in front of their eyes, by that atrocious terrorist organisation Daesh, were beyond moving. They shook me to my core. They made me not just think but resolve in myself and together with my team, to reflect the priority the Prime Minister has given to this issue, to do even more.

I heard of a woman who saw her own child being murdered in front of her eyes, and then worse still, then, and I'm sorry to be so blunt but it conveys the message of religious persecution, she was offered that child as meat on a plate. This reflects the challenge that we face around the world. The dehumanisation of a whole community. Why? Because of their religion, because of their belief. We must not just consolidate and collaborate, we must strengthen in our resolve to meet a challenge head on.

In other places in the world, I have also heard the stories of children denied an education due to their religion; of attacks against those who declare they have no faith: and in other parts of the world of places of worship raised to the ground.

Like the story of Father Daniel from the Nineveh Plain in Iraq, who when he met our Prime Minister Theresa May, what did he do, he handed her a Bible, retrieved from a church burnt to the ground by Daesh. That survival of the holy Bible symbolised the hope that Christians in Iraq continue to hold in their hearts, that once again they will be allowed to freely practice their faith in safety in their homeland, in their country.

And I assure you ladies and gentlemen, that the Prime Minister remains committed to not only promoting tolerance, but also the understanding and protecting freedoms to practice faith and belief at home and indeed overseas. So the letter she received from six-year old Zeal Saunders from Devon, must have particularly resonated with her. For he wrote, and I quote: Dear Prime Minister, I have just learnt about people in prison in other countries simply because they are Christians. They should be as safe as us. Please do everything you can to help them. Thank you.

And I assure you ladies and gentlemen, the Prime Minister is doing just that, everything she can. And I join with her and I know many in this room to share that determination that we must take action to confront the worrying levels of religious persecution around the globe.

As I said earlier, it is an incredible honour, it is humbling for me that the Prime Minister has asked me to act as her Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief. And in this role, I assure you I give the commitment that I will not only lead but I will strengthen targeted international efforts to raise awareness of intolerance and persecution of people of all faiths and none.

Priorities as PM Special Envoy on FoRB

As Special Envoy, one of my main priorities will be to promote a change in our efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief. I will work with our overseas network to ensure that discussion on freedom of religion or belief is included in the discussions we have at the highest level, in our dialogue with host governments.

Recently, I visited Algeria and Tunisia. When I was in Tunisia I chose to visit the central synagogue in Tunis, a small Jewish community in the heart of an Arabic, Muslim country, visited by a British Minister, who some would argue represents a traditional Christian country but Muslim of faith himself. My presence raised a few eyebrows and interest by those surrounding me. It was simple but incredible. That action and the ability to bring communities together, is I feel a great responsibility on all of us, not least on a Minister within the Government.

Those kind of acts bring communities together: the sharing of ideas, the sharing of a common cause, and yes, whilst there are challenges that remain, the importance of the shared humanity with people of all faiths.

And therefore I will continue to work with our Ambassadors in countries where we judge that the UK has most influence and can contribute to long-term change, and we will respond quickly and effectively to instances of religious repression. But as with our other human rights priorities, I look to many in this room to help me and stand with me in that important and noble cause

This diplomacy will be supported this year by around £1 million from our Magna Carta fund. This will make a wide range of projects possible, including projects that promote respect through education in Iraq, help human rights defenders supporting FoRB in Burma and capacity building on this priority for parliamentarians in Sudan.

International partnerships will also be essential, and I will continue to build strong relationships with partners working on this field in Europe and the Holy See, and also America and the Middle East. I have recently had productive meetings with the Danish government and European Commission's FoRB Special Envoys, and I will continue to forge international collaboration. Indeed tomorrow, I shall be leaving for the international conference convened by the United States in Washington on religious freedom which will be hosted by the US Secretary of State, Pompeo, in Washington later this week.

Respect through education

Educating the next generation to respect each other's faith or belief is, I believe, vital if we are to eliminate intolerance, promote understanding and ultimately break down barriers of ignorance and fear in communities. Ladies and gentlemen, it is essential that we educate our children to understand other religions, in the hope that they will be wiser and more tolerant.

As a moment of personal reflection, nothing makes me more proud, as a born and bred Brit of Indian heritage, that I choose to send my children to quality schools: a nursery for my youngest, which is a Church of England

nursery; and for my eldest, I chose Jesuit schools. Yes they are good schools, and that's important for a parent, but it's the ethos or the faith of the school, which is also important. It's those those freedoms that we enjoy in the United Kingdom, not just tolerance and understanding, but also that strength and diversity of our communities, of faith communities, and those of no faith, that underlining priority, which I believe is the great strength of our nation. Promoting tolerance and understanding is a primary objective for Britain to instil in other parts of the world through constructive collaboration and progress. A young child is not born with prejudices, any kind of prejudice, they learn prejudices from those around them, people and society. Therefore, States, Governments, all of us have a responsibility to teach them about respect, inclusivity and not just tolerance but also understanding It was Nelson Mandela who famously said education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.

Conclusion

But that change cannot be affected by Governments alone. And that is why again I put on record to many in the room and beyond, the great value we attach to your work, to the support of non-government organisations, civil society and faith groups, and leaders, many of you here today, in the strength of our relationship of promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief, of human rights. Your partnership, your advice your direction and your thoughts, your observations, your experiences are vital in taking all these important strands of our human rights work forward. And let me assure you, and as long as I am Minister of Human Rights, I know I speak on behalf of the Government who have the shared sentiment and priority, the doors to Ministerial Offices and to this incredible the senior team working on this important agenda are always open, open to good ideas, open to experiences, open with a willingness to collaborate on these important priorities.

And let me assure you finally, for my part, I am determined to champion the Government's defence of its full range of commitments set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As we reflect back, this year, the 70th anniversary year of the Declaration we are reminded of the importance of continuing to defend and promote and strengthen the values it enshrines. We picked up that challenge in 1948, and let me assure you we will continue to rise to that challenge in the years ahead, with the ultimate noble objective to ensure that the rights set out in that historic document 70 years ago should not remain a dream for many parts of the world. And by selling our objectives, our collaboration, and our partnerships, at the strongest level, I assure you that we will continue to see progress towards with that ultimate ambition that those very rights we enjoy, can be enjoyed by all. Thank you.