

Statement to Parliament: International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day 2017: Mark Field's statement

I am delighted to represent the Government in this debate and, along with everyone else, to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing it on such an important occasion. I pay tribute to him and to all the members of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief for their continued strong commitment to promoting this universal human right. We welcome the views of parliamentarians and civil society groups on what more we might do, and we seek to act on those views where possible.

I was going to thank the new boy and the new girl who have made speeches today, but unfortunately the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) has now left the Chamber. Perhaps he took to heart the idea of catching a plane home—he has a slightly longer commute to his constituency than I do, of course. He and the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) made good and heartfelt speeches, as indeed did all Members who contributed.□

To speak slightly personally, I have spent all but four months of my 16 years in this place as a Back Bencher. Although I believe firmly that I must speak today on behalf of the Government, I am also aware, as the Government need to be aware, that we do not have a full majority in the House of Commons. Therefore, the opinions of Parliament in this and many other matters have increasing importance. I take seriously this sort of debate. In my role as a Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister, I will endeavour to pass it on to the high commissions and embassies within my bailiwick, in order to ensure that the concerns expressed by parliamentarians do not just die in the ether or appear on a few pages of Hansard for a particular day, but are given practical effect. I give my word to everyone here that I shall endeavour to do so and to boil down the issues debated, as well as the important report, to make a practical—if not life-changing—day-to-day difference in how our embassies and high commissions operate. I will ensure that the concerns addressed by parliamentarians, not just in this debate but in numerous others, are brought to bear.

To an extent, that has already been done in relation to Burma, as the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) pointed out. As my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford rightly said, more than 600,000 Rohingya have been forced to flee to Bangladesh since 25 August. Parliamentarians' active role has contributed to the UK's continuing leading international position on the matter. The issue is evolving, and I know that frustration has been expressed at various times, not least by the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton, and rightly so; it is her role in opposition to provide a practical sense of concern about the pace of reform.

I spoke about the issue yesterday at a Foreign Affairs Committee hearing. The situation continues to evolve, in diplomatic and political terms. As recently as Monday I was at the United Nations in Geneva to pledge on behalf of UK taxpayers an additional £12 million, bringing to £47 million, or \$62 million, the UK's contribution to the heartfelt international efforts in response to this terrible humanitarian catastrophe, which at the moment is occurring predominantly in Bangladesh. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton is absolutely right that we are doing all we can to ensure that the displaced can return to Burma, and one hopes that some of the money will be spent to rebuild lives and villages on that side of the border.

That is an example of what is going on; no doubt in three or four months' time there will be other issues for me, as a Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister, or one of my colleagues, to deal with. That is why we appreciate the work of the all-party parliamentary group and parliamentarians to raise the temperature of such important issues; it informs and complements our work overseas. I stress that I will, in my own small way as a Minister, take it seriously. If we hear such representations, we will try to ensure that we can act on them in our embassies and high commissions elsewhere.

Tomorrow our posts across the diplomatic network will mark International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day in various ways. I want to mark the occasion by reiterating the Government's commitment to promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief, reflecting on the situation in a number of countries of particular concern and setting out what action the Government are taking on the issue.□

Article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights is the fundamental principle underpinning our work. It defines freedom of religion or belief as "the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion".

As a number of hon. Members have pointed out in this debate, the article states that everyone has the right to choose a religion or belief, or to have no religious belief at all. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister spoke earlier this year about her

"determination to stand up for the freedom of people of all religions to practice their beliefs in peace and safety."

I set out my own personal commitment on this issue when I last spoke on it in a debate in July, and I know that Lord Ahmad, the FCO Minister with responsibility for human rights, regularly expresses sentiments similar to mine, both in the other place and in his engagements in London and overseas. I also know that he was with many Members yesterday in Speaker's House for the [launch of the APPG's report](#), which is a genuinely impressive piece of work that will further inform our efforts in this area.

We make those efforts not just because the right to freedom of religion or belief is a principle worth defending for its own sake. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who said that we also make those efforts because we believe that societies in which people are free

to practise their faith or belief are, by their very nature, more stable, more prosperous and more resilient to extremism.

Sadly, however, the situation in a number of countries around the world continues to cause grave concern, and as I have a little more time than I had anticipated I will give some specific examples. The information provided by the Pew Research Centre shows that Christians have been harassed in more countries than any other religious group. The middle east is the cradle of the religion, although obviously it is also the cradle of other religions, namely Islam and Judaism. However, Christians in the middle east are particularly suffering from harassment. In Iraq the Christian population has fallen from over 1 million in 2003 to a current estimate of 250,000. We are also concerned about the plight of Christians in Syria, Burma and a number of other countries.

However, followers of all faiths and religions suffer persecution, as at times do people of no faith, so I will set out what the UK Government are doing in some specific cases. Essentially, our approach is to tackle the issue on two fronts: first, working with and strongly lobbying countries individually; and secondly, working within organisations such as the United Nations.

A recent example of our bilateral approach is our work to defend the rights of Christians in Sudan, and we welcomed the release of several pastors earlier this year. We have also called for the release of the Eritrean Patriarch, Abune Antonios, and we are supporting the rights of many faith groups, including the Baha'i in Iran and, as has already been said, the Rohingya Muslims in Burma. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) made the important point that some Rohingya are actually Hindu and that some have no religion at all, but they too have been persecuted during these terrible times. What I am saying also applies to [Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia](#) and Shi'a Muslims in several countries, including Saudi Arabia.□

Lord Ahmad recently visited an Ahmadiyya mosque in Dhaka in Bangladesh for a multi-faith gathering, at which he made a call for universal religious tolerance. Most recently, we have expressed concern about proposed amendments to the law in Nepal, which my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford rightly said would restrict religious freedoms. Only last month I had the opportunity to speak about that issue directly with my US counterpart at the UN General Assembly.

As an example of our multilateral work to defend and protect religious freedoms, I draw the House's attention to the UK's leading role in the global efforts to bring ISIS or Daesh to justice. All of us here are only too aware of the absolutely appalling treatment that that paramilitary group has meted out to anyone who does not subscribe to its extremist ideology. That has included religious minorities in Iraq and Syria—Christians and Yazidis—and of course the majority Muslim populations in those countries.

The UK is determined that Daesh will not get away with it. That is important not only in countering extremism, but in defending the right to freedom of religion or belief. We have led the multilateral response to Daesh. My right

hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, together with his Belgian and Iraqi counterparts, got the ball rolling last year with a UK-led initiative to bring Daesh to justice. Just last month a new UK-drafted UN resolution, co-sponsored by 46 member states, including Iraq, was [adopted unanimously by the Security Council](#), as Daesh Accountability Resolution 2379. The resolution calls on the UN Secretary General to establish an investigative team to collect, preserve and store evidence of crimes by so-called Islamic State, beginning in Iraq. I know that we will be supported by members of the APPG, who focused on the issue when their report was launched yesterday.

That UN investigative team will be led by a special adviser with a mandate to promote the need to bring ISIS to justice around the globe. We have contributed, as a down-payment, £1 million to support the establishment of the team, to ensure that it is adequately resourced at the outset and that the evidence collected is used to bring the perpetrators to book.

However, our work on promoting freedom of religion or belief goes beyond bilateral or multilateral efforts overseas. We are also now committed to stepping up our engagement with faith leaders here in the UK. That is why Lord Ahmad has established a regular roundtable with a variety of faith leaders and representatives, the first of which he hosted as recently as Monday. The aim of the roundtable is to discuss how the Government and faith leaders can work together to address issues of religious freedom. We want faith groups to play a bigger role in seeking solutions to international crises and to broader international challenges. That international network will be of critical importance. Also, when the Foreign and Commonwealth Office marks International Human Rights Day in December, we will focus particularly on promoting freedom of religion or belief, and on the important role that faith leaders can play in driving that agenda.

We shall continue to support religious freedom and tolerance through our project work under the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Magna Carta fund for human rights and democracy. I must confess that I am particularly proud of a project that is helping secondary school teachers in the middle east and north Africa to create lesson plans that promote tolerance and freedom of religion or belief among all their pupils. The project is being implemented by an organisation called Hardwired Inc, which, along with other civil society organisations, is a vital partner in our efforts to make article 18 a reality. I pay tribute to its dedicated work.

We continue to strive to be as effective as possible in promoting freedom of religion or belief. Ensuring that our embassy and high commission staff are properly trained is an essential part of that programme, and I know that the APPG's report rightly highlighted such training. I will continue to look for ways to improve religious literacy among our staff. We already provide a set of resources to support their work, which we will promote more widely to our posts overseas. Earlier this month the FCO launched a new religion and diplomacy course. We will continue to review actively both that course and the feedback it receives from our staff, to ensure that it meets our needs in a fast-changing world.

In addition, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad will write to all our ambassadors and

high commissioners tomorrow, reissuing our freedom of religion or belief toolkit and instructing them to give serious consideration to freedom of religious belief in their diplomatic engagement with host Governments. Where there are violations of religious belief, Members can be assured that the FCO and its Ministers are clear that they will be addressed through our diplomacy with international partners.

In partnership with Lord Ahmad, I will also write to the embassies and high commissions in key countries for which I have responsibility, asking them to report on precisely what they are doing to promote freedom of religion or belief. I will ensure that our embassies are aware of the strength of both parliamentary feeling and my own personal feelings on this issue.

As recently as 2011 there were 150,000 Christians in the city of Aleppo in Syria, which is a country I visited in my first term as a Member of Parliament. Now, as far as we can understand, there are fewer than 35,000. Religious persecution has increased in other Muslim countries, such as Pakistan, Sudan and Iran. In Nigeria, 1.8 million people have been displaced by Boko Haram. In India, it has been suggested that the harassment of Christians has increased with the current rise of Hindu nationalism. However, I also take on board what my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East said on that issue, namely that Hindus and Sikhs themselves are under day-to-day threat in parts of the subcontinent. In China there are now no fewer than 127 million Christians, which I fear has upset the authorities there, who see Christianity as some form of foreign infiltration and seek to Sinicise it in some way.

I will now take the opportunity to address one or two issues that were specifically raised by a number of Members. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford that there are concerns that some provisions of the new penal code in Nepal may be constructed to limit the freedom to adapt, change or practise a religion. I have already raised those concerns with the Government of Nepal and will continue to do so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) mentioned Egypt, which is a human rights priority country. Her Majesty's Government have been clear that freedom of religion or belief needs to be actively protected. The Government of Egypt have stated their commitment to protecting the rights of minorities and the need for religious tolerance. We regularly raise concerns with the Egyptian Government about the deteriorating human rights situation, including issues that affect Christians. The Coptic Christian community is made up of 8 million to 9 million people and has been around as long as any other Christian group, but there are great fears for its future, and certainly for its future stability.

May I take this opportunity to apologise to the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who has not yet received a response to his letter on behalf of his constituent from 25 August? I will endeavour to find out where the letter has gone in the system. He made some interesting comments about the apostasy issue. I will contact the Home Office to request that it finds a way to include such cases within the hate crime statistics, if that is at all possible. I will get back to him when I have a reply.

There was a slightly discordant shot from the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on genocide. Genocide is strictly a legal term. Whether a parliamentary motion or Ministers refer to it as genocide is neither here nor there; it is strictly a legal term. With what has been happening in Burma and various other parts of the world, it is clear that a process has to be gone through in the UN and finally in the International Criminal Court before a genocide can be proven.

I want to reassure those Members who raised the issue of funding. All DFID's support to Governments involves discussions on human rights, and we will continue to give serious consideration to adopting recommendations 1 and 2 from the report to take account of DFID and FCO funding streams. I do not want to commit my Department on the Floor of the House without it having had a proper look through all the recommendations. To be brutally honest, many of them relate to issues that we already address on a day-to-day basis, but we will give the report serious consideration. Once we have had a chance to look through all the recommendations, I will get back to the shadow Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford to say which ones we are in a position fully to adopt and what action we would look to take elsewhere.

In conclusion, the Government believe strongly that whole societies benefit when the fundamental rights of all their citizens are respected and protected. That includes the right to religious freedom or belief, or to have no religion at all. That is why we will continue to work with individual countries, with the international community and with faith leaders and civil society organisations to promote and defend this fundamental right. The UK Government's position is to remain absolutely committed to promoting freedom of religion or belief as enshrined in article 18 of the international covenant on civil and political rights, supported by article 2 on non-discrimination and article 26 on access to justice. I think I speak for everyone who has contributed to this important debate when I say this: only when these universal rights are universally respected can there be religious freedom for everyone, everywhere.