

UK to champion importance of freedom of religion or belief at global conference

- The UK will host over 600 faith, belief, government and civil society leaders from 100 countries in London on July 5 and 6 to call for more action to protect the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) around the world.
- Foreign Secretary Liz Truss will call out abuses, including in China, Nigeria and Afghanistan, and say religion is “collateral damage” in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.
- The UK will announce £500,000 of funding to support everyone’s “fundamental freedom” to follow a religion or belief.

The UK will today (Tuesday 5 July) welcome faith, belief, government and civil society leaders from around the world to London to boost efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) internationally.

In a speech at the QEII Centre, Foreign Secretary Liz Truss will say FoRB is a “fundamental freedom” like free speech or democracy.

More than 80% of the world’s population live in countries where FoRB is under threat.

The Foreign Secretary will call out the “appalling persecution of the Jewish community over centuries”, China’s targeting of Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang region, the persecution of Christians in Nigeria and the plight of minorities in Afghanistan.

Ms Truss is expected to say:

The freedom to believe, to pray and commit acts of worship is a fundamental human freedom and has been one since the dawn of time. Societies that allow their people to believe are better and ultimately more successful.

This fundamental right is covered in the very first clause of Magna Carta and Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

She will respond to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the impact it has on people’s ability to practice their faith or belief addressing an audience that will include a Ukrainian delegation, telling them the UK will not rest until “your people are free to live, believe and thrive”. She will add:

Vladimir Putin and his enablers think Russia is waging a holy war, but in truth nothing is sacred. We are seeing growing evidence of

heinous war crimes committed by Russian troops.

Innocent civilians are having to shelter from Russia's indiscriminate bombardment in places of worship. Churches, synagogues, and mosques have been reduced to rubble. Religion is proving to be collateral damage from Putin's aggression.

Opening the conference, His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales will say in a recorded statement:

Freedom of conscience, of thought and of belief is central to any truly flourishing society. It allows people to contribute to their communities without fear of exclusion, to exchange ideas without fear of prejudice, and to build relationships without fear of rejection.

A society where difference is respected, where it is accepted that all need not think alike, will benefit from the talents of all of its members.

The Prince of Wales will describe the "tragic paradox" of people with strong belief disrespecting others, and he will use the opportunity to urge delegates to "take us closer to our goal" of FoRB for everyone, everywhere.

The conference will showcase practical actions on how to achieve FoRB for all. This includes developing early warning systems, building more resilient societies, tackling online harm and discrimination, strengthening human rights education, and encouraging media freedom.

Speakers will include the Most Rev and Rt Hon Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, Islamic Scholar Sheikh Abdallah Bin-bayyah and Archbishop Bashar Warda of the Chaldean Catholic church in Erbil, Iraq.

The UK will also announce today £200,000 in new support for the protection and promotion of FoRB. This will fund awareness campaigns, community programmes and support conflict prevention, as well as providing direct assistance to those facing discrimination based on religion or belief

The UK will pledge another £300,000 to provide British legal expertise to countries where FoRB is under pressure. This support will ensure governments and advocates have a better understanding of the legal steps they can take to implement lasting and legislative change in their country.

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Minister Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon said:

The international community shares a collective responsibility to ensure freedom of religion or belief for everyone, everywhere. Too

many people around the world are denied access to this fundamental human right, persecuted, or indeed tragically killed simply because of their faith I look forward to welcoming partners from around the world to London to help drive collective action in defending everyone's right to freedom of religion or belief.

UK Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion of Belief Fiona Bruce, (FoRB) said:

I am delighted that the UK is hosting the International Ministerial Conference in London this week. This is an important opportunity to share best practice and strengthen international alliances, such as the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA), which I am chairing this year. We need greater collective action to ensure the right to freedom of religion or belief is protected for everyone, everywhere.

ENDS