

# Statement of the Group of Friends of Women in Afghanistan

The Group of Friends of Women in Afghanistan express deep concern regarding the increasing erosion of respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women and girls in Afghanistan by the Taliban, including through continued restrictions that limit access to education for women and girls.

The members call on the Taliban to immediately reverse the effective ban on girls' secondary education in Afghanistan, which has been in place for over one year. Members are deeply disturbed by developments where local community demands lead to the reopening of some girls' secondary schools, only to see them forcibly shut down by the Taliban once again. They underscore that the decision by the Taliban to exclude girls from schools does not reflect the wishes and demands of the majority of the Afghan people and that it makes Afghanistan the only country in the world that bans girls' secondary education.

The members of the Group reaffirm the right to education for all Afghans, including girls, and call on the Taliban to respect the right to education and adhere to their commitments to reopen schools for all female students across the country without further delay. They note the importance of education of all people to economic stability and reiterate that exclusion from education prevents women and girls from contributing to Afghanistan's future economic growth and prosperity. Furthermore, they emphasize findings by the World Economic Forum that banning women from working in the government and formal sectors will cause Afghanistan's GDP to contract by a minimum of \$600 million in the immediate term and restrictions on women's private sector employment could lead to a \$1.5 billion loss of output by 2024.

The members of the Group note the heightened risks associated with disruption of access to education, particularly for girls, making them more vulnerable to child labour and child, early, and forced marriages, as well as to their future economic opportunities, and the long-term consequences this has for durable peace, security and development.

The members of the Group request the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to continue to closely monitor and report on the situation, and request the Special Representative of the Secretary-General to continue to engage with all relevant Afghan political actors and stakeholders, including relevant authorities, on this issue, in accordance with the mandate of UNAMA.

This statement is endorsed by the following members of the Group of Friends of Women in Afghanistan: United Kingdom, Qatar, Australia, Bangladesh, Belgium, Canada, Chad, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Slovenia, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, United States

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## Water company hit with a combined fine of £871,000

One incident caused the death of invertebrate life in a stream for 1.5 kilometres.

Anglian Water has been slapped with a fine totalling £871,000 after a catalogue of system and maintenance failures caused separate incidents of pollution across 3 counties.

The list of process failures included reporting delays, faulty screening and a general breakdown in planning and maintenance, all of which caused damaging blockages and pollution.

One involved a failure by Anglian Water, who set an alarm to the wrong village, delaying their attendance for days. A subsequent biological survey showed dead aquatic invertebrates for 1,500 metres as far down as the next village, as a result.

The water company was also ordered to pay £37,605.13 in costs at Loughborough Magistrates (12 October 2022).

While passing sentence, District Judge Nick Watson, said: 'Anglian Water dragged its feet' in addressing infrastructure improvements.

He said that this appeared to be: '...an endemic part of the culture of the organisation at the time of the offences'.

He added, 'Water companies have a huge responsibility to proactively manage the resources they have been given a responsibility for. Profit must not be at the cost of the environment.'

All incidents took place at Anglian Water sites in Cambridgeshire, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire across a 5 month spell, between May and September 2019.

The first involved the discharge of poorly treated sewage into the River Lark near Ely in Cambridgeshire in May 2019 from the Isleham sewage treatment works, Isleham.

An unchecked build-up of 'unflushables' such as cotton buds and sanitary pads caused a blockage resulting in discharge of settled sludge into the treated sewage.

The site was originally fitted with a screen to prevent blockages in the process but was removed in 2018. The court heard that increased cleaning had not taken place and no steps taken to reduce the risk of blockages caused by the removal of the screen.

This was likely to have impacted on the River Lark, as the discharge caused reduced levels of dissolved oxygen in the water necessary for fish and invertebrates.

A second incident involved sewage pollution of a tributary of the River Tove, in Hartwell, Northamptonshire in June 2019. The source of the pollution was an Anglian Water Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO), at Hartwell Colmar Kennels, in Hartwell.

After a delay, Anglian Water Operational Control was notified, and the blockage cleared soon after. A tanker was ordered and sewage and 'unflushables' cleared from 10 metres of stream.

It was later found that Anglian Water had delayed reporting to the Environment Agency by over 5 hours.

They had also put an operational warning sensor on the sewer but the telemetry was assigned to the wrong address in a nearby village.

The sensor alarmed in good time and Anglian Water attended but went to the wrong address missing the opportunity to minimise the pollution.

Traces of sewage fungus were present in the stream suggesting the pollution had been occurring for days. A biological survey showed dead aquatic invertebrates for 1,500 metres and as far down as the next village of Ashton.

The court heard how the third incident involved the pollution of a tributary of Claydon Brook, Steeple Claydon in September the same year. The source was Anglian Water sewage treatment works at Steeple Claydon in Buckinghamshire.

The site does have a screening unit on site to reduce blockages in the treatment process, but this had not been used for a few years.

The scum board is meant to prevent the carry over of 'unflushables' and sludge from the primary settlement tanks. This had been incorrectly left at the wrong end of the tank. A routine maintenance visit had also been missed. This resulted in a blockage and loss of treatment.

Anglian Water did not assess the impact on the watercourse, but high levels of organic pollution were detected in water samples. This impacted the levels of oxygen in the stream necessary for fish and invertebrate life.

Environment Agency prosecutor, Rebecca Chalkley, told the court that the 3 pollutions shared common features. She said they all involved missing or inadequate screens that should have strained solid waste from raw sewage.

She said they all involved a delay in attending or reporting pollution incidents. Also they all represented a failure on the part of Anglian Water to properly invest and maintain its infrastructure.

She added: 'With great profit comes great responsibility'.

Sir James Bevan, Chief Executive at the Environment Agency, said:

We welcome this sentence. Serious pollution is a serious crime.

The Environment Agency will pursue any water company that fails to uphold the law or protect nature, and will continue to press for the strongest possible penalties for those which do not.

Jeremy Hay, Senior Environment Officer from the Environment Agency, said:

This prosecution sends out the message that we will not hesitate to prosecute companies which endanger communities and disregard the environment and the law.

Members of the public with concerns about pollution should contact our 24-hour incident hotline on: 0800 80 70 60.

## Background

The Environment Agency has significantly driven up monitoring and transparency from water companies in recent years, so that everyone can see what is going on. This includes:

- **Event Duration Monitoring:** This measures how often and for how long storm overflows are used. The Environment Agency has increased the number of overflows monitored across the network from 800 in 2016 to more than 12,700 in 2021, the equivalent of almost 9 in 10 storm overflows now with monitoring devices. All 15,000 overflows will have them by the end of 2023. All the data is published [online](#). More info on EDM [here](#).
- **Flow-to-full treatment:** Environment Agency has also asked companies to install new flow monitors on more than 2,000 wastewater treatment works to identify what is happening at those works during the sewage treatment process itself. This has led to a major investigation, announced in November 2021, with the EA requesting more detailed data from all wastewater treatment works.
- **Storm Overflows Taskforce:** Through the work of the Storm Overflows Taskforce – made up of Defra, the Environment Agency, Ofwat, Consumer Council for Water, Blueprint for Water and Water UK – water companies have agreed to increase transparency around when and how storm overflows are used: Make real-time data on sewage discharges available at bathing sites all year round.
- **Publish annual monitoring data on their websites** so that progress in reducing their use can be tracked. The Environment Agency will compile this data into an annual report that is easily accessible to the public. This data is also being used at an operational level to prioritise the most frequent spills for further assessment by EA officers.
- The Environment Agency has taken tough action against those companies which are breaking the rules:
- In 2021 the Environment Agency concluded 7 prosecutions against water and sewerage companies with fines of £90 million, 2 of £4 million, £2.3

million, £1.5 million, £150,000, and £540,000. 6 prosecutions have already concluded in 2022 with fines of £1,600,750, £300,000, £240,000, £233,000, £50,000, and £18,000, and more prosecutions are progressing in court.

- The Environment Agency has launched a major investigation into possible unauthorised spills at thousands of sewage treatment works.
- We will always seek to hold those responsible for environmental harm to account.

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## **UK announces humanitarian assistance for 150,000 women and children suffering drought and conflict in Ethiopia**

- Minister for Development Vicky Ford uses a two-day visit to Ethiopia to urge for peace and pledge more support to victims of the drought affecting 24 million already vulnerable people
- support will provide hundreds of thousands of severely malnourished children, mothers and survivors of sexual violence with medical treatment, water, sanitation, basic education and mental health support
- Minister Ford will urge for an end to fighting for the sake of civilians, particularly in the north, facing violence and starvation

UK aid will help to protect women and children from the devastating impacts of violent conflict and the worst drought in 40 years in Ethiopia, Minister for Development Vicky Ford announced today [19 October] during a visit to the country.

With 24 million people affected by the drought in Ethiopia, the Minister will visit a UK-supported hospital where severely malnourished children under 5 receive life-saving treatment. The Minister will also visit a UK-funded school where children are able to get back to learning and receive mental health support after experiencing conflict and drought.

A new £14 million UK funding package is expected to reach up to 150,000 people with comprehensive health, water sanitation, hygiene and nutrition services; 50,000 people with emergency financial support and 20,000 pupils with emergency education. The funding will also protect children from violence and exploitation and provide women subject to sexual violence with mental health support.

Minister Ford made the announcement while on a two-day visit to Ethiopia to raise awareness of the impact of drought and armed conflict. She will meet with members of the Government of Ethiopia and will urge for an end to the

ongoing conflict in Tigray, in northern Ethiopia, which has resulted in awful violence against civilians. The Minister will also address the conflict-related sexual violence suffered by women and girls in the region.

This is part of a wider £156 million UK commitment to humanitarian support for crises in East Africa this year.

Minister for Development, Vicky Ford said:

Ethiopia faces multiple pressing crises, including a catastrophic drought which has affected 24 million people. The escalation of fighting in northern Ethiopia has made an already dire situation even worse and left many extremely vulnerable, including women and girls.

We are a committed, long-standing partner to Ethiopia. We continue to provide life-saving healthcare, nutrition and water, which will be boosted by the £14 million funding which I have announced today.

We will continue to stand by the Ethiopian people and to call for peace. I urge the international community to act now to prevent the desperate humanitarian situation from deteriorating.

In the last 18 months, the UK has committed over £75 million of humanitarian aid to Ethiopia. This new funding brings this figure to nearly £90 million.

Last year in Ethiopia, UK funding provided nutritious food for over 200,000 malnourished women and children, provided emergency health supplies for 1 million people, provided clean water to over 200,000 people; and child protection services to over 40,000 children affected by conflict.

- the humanitarian context across the region is challenging with more than 68 million people facing high levels of food insecurity
- Ethiopia, South Sudan and Somalia are all at risk famine
- conflict, climate extremes including flooding and drought and the key drivers of suffering in the region. The poorest communities in East Africa are also bearing the brunt of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine which has contributed to price inflation for staple goods
- the UK aims to allocate £156 million in humanitarian support across East Africa in financial year 2022 to 2023

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**Human rights must remain the guiding light for our work at the UN: UK**

# [national statement at Third Committee](#)

Thank you, Chair, and just to start let me say what a pleasure it is to be back in the Third Committee where I started my UN career.

Mr Chair, seventy-seven years ago the first UN Member States signed the UN Charter, “determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war” while “promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms”.

Those principles have stood the test of time, and must remain the guiding light for our work at the UN and in the Third Committee. But regrettably, today, the world remains ridden with conflict. While suffering is most acute at the front lines, millions more are impacted by the secondary effects.

Since February, Russia has waged a war of aggression against Ukraine, displaying heinous butchery and wanton destruction. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine concluded that war crimes have been committed. Russia has deployed explosive weapons in populated areas, tortured those in unlawful confinement and some Russian soldiers have committed sexual and gender-based crimes, including against children.

In April, horrific images from Bucha and Irpin demonstrated the lengths Russia will go to to suppress dissent: merciless and deliberate killing of civilians. Russia’s barbarism cannot be ignored by this Committee. Those responsible must be held to account.

Russia’s gross and systematic violations of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law are well documented; and it was right that the General Assembly suspended Russia’s membership of the Human Rights Council.

As Russia’s human rights record further degrades, we also welcome the HRC’s decision to examine Russia’s repression of its own citizens. We must support ordinary Russians who face brutal restrictions on fundamental freedoms. And we must recognise how this repression enables Russia’s aggression abroad.

Mr Chair, we also remain deeply concerned by the situation of the Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang. The former High Commissioner for Human Rights found evidence of arbitrary detention, torture, sexual and gender-based violence, forced sterilisations and abortions, and destruction of religious sites. The wealth of evidence led her to conclude that China’s actions may constitute crimes against humanity. Rather than stifle debate and deny the findings, we urge China to implement the report’s recommendations, including by allowing independent UN experts to conduct unrestricted visits to Xinjiang.

Such systemic discrimination only reaffirms the need for our collective commitment to freedom of religion or belief. Building mutual understanding and respect between communities is essential to fighting intolerance. In July, the UK hosted a Ministerial Conference on FoRB and will

never stand by while individuals live in fear of discrimination, hostility or acts of violence because of their religion, belief, or ethnicity.

This pursuit of equality is central to the UK's human rights approach. Nowhere more so than in our efforts to advance gender equality through the protection and promotion of women's and girls' rights. We remain steadfast in respecting the bodily autonomy of women and girls as they exercise their sexual and reproductive rights. We must also increase efforts to prevent gender-based violence, and to eliminate harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and child, early and forced marriage.

We also remain deeply alarmed by the continued proliferation of conflict related sexual violence. Next month, the UK will host a Ministerial conference to highlight the best means to prevent CRSV, improve justice and accountability, and understand ways to better support survivors.

Mr Chair, we recognise the vital role of civil society in the promotion of human rights. The UK looks forward to joining the NGO Committee in January. Through our membership, we will continue to champion civil society participation, both in the field and in discussions at the UN.

Mr Chair, we can all do better to uphold our human rights obligations. We must act now and fight impunity wherever it may occur.

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## **We condemn all acts of intimidation or reprisal against those who cooperate with the UN**

Thank you Chair,

I have the honour to deliver this cross-regional statement on behalf of Ireland and 79 other countries, as well as the European Union.

The world owes a debt to civil society actors and human rights defenders. Without their cooperation and meaningful engagement, we cannot make informed decisions here at the United Nations, and UN entities, agencies, missions and human rights mechanisms cannot effectively carry out their mandates.

When individuals or organisations face threats, retaliation or harm when engaging with international bodies, not only do the individuals involved suffer, but our collective efforts towards peace and security, towards upholding human rights and towards sustainable development suffer.

We therefore unequivocally condemn all acts of intimidation or reprisal committed against those who have cooperated or who seek to cooperate with the



UN.

We welcome the Secretary General's most recent annual report on reprisals, as well as the presentation last week to the General Assembly by Assistant Secretary General Ilze Brands Kehris of this report. The cases documented in the report show the breadth of this issue, with reprisals perpetrated by State and non-State actors, online and offline, and across many countries throughout regions. It is essential that this issue is addressed in a coordinated manner, and therefore we welcome the opportunity to discuss it in New York during the Third Committee, as well as in Geneva.

We share the Secretary-General's concerns about a number of trends identified in the report, in particular:

- That women, minorities, members of indigenous communities, peacebuilders and human rights defenders continue to be disproportionately targeted;
- That there is evidence of an increase of online surveillance, privacy intrusion and cyberattacks used against victims and civil society;
- That the application of laws and other instruments regulating NGOs and their access to funding have placed additional obstacles for civil society's engagement and advocacy efforts at the UN;
- That counter-terrorism laws have been misused against organizations and individuals for their cooperation with the UN;
- And that these restrictive measures, as well as stigmatizing public discourse, have had the effect of deterring victims and civil society from cooperating with the United Nations.

These persistent patterns indicate a concerted effort by both State and non-State actors to silence those who are speaking out and sharing information with the UN. They are compelled to exercise self-censorship out of fear of retribution and harm. This has a profound effect on the impact of the UN operations on the ground and reflects a wider trend of closing civic space globally.

We therefore call on all States to take proactive steps to address reprisals. This involves conducting robust investigations, fully complying with international law obligations, and ensuring accountability. It also involves supporting and protecting victims from threats and violence.

We also encourage all States to promote a safe and enabling environment for civil society in their own countries, including online. Human rights defenders should be able to operate in a safe and open environment, free from coercion, threats of violence and intimidation. They should not be silenced.

We also urge all member states to promote cooperation with the UN, and to support the work of the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights. We call on all to report any cases of reprisals, whether perpetrated by State or non-State actors, that occur within their countries.

We also call on States to provide emergency grants to those facing intimidation or reprisal in conflict settings following engagement in multilateral spaces.

Finally, the United Nations itself has a heightened responsibility when those who cooperate with the organisation are targeted. We therefore call on the UN to ensure that it is doing all it can to facilitate a safe environment. This involves a coordinated response across all agencies and bodies of the system in ensuring robust measures are in place to mitigate risks of reprisals. We welcome initiatives to reinforce UN coordination and readiness on this issue, including the 2020 Guidance note on the protection and promotion of civic space, and the guidance on mitigating reprisals for the Security Council, and we call on the UN to ensure these are effectively implemented.

We also encourage the UN to continue its efforts to improve data collection, analysis and documentation of cases, and to use this information to actively improve policies and practices so that the gaps existing in our collective efforts are closed.

Chair, those who cooperate or seek to cooperate with the UN are performing a public service on a global level. They should never face intimidation, threats or harm as a result.

Thank you.

Signatories:

Afghanistan, Antigua and Barbuda, Albania, Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bahamas, Belgium, Belize, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cabo Verde, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Estonia, Finland, Fiji, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Latvia, Liberia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Maldives, Malta, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Moldova, Monaco, Mongolia, Montenegro, Nauru, Netherlands, New Zealand, North Macedonia, Norway, Panama, Palau, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Samoa, San Marino, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Timor-Leste, Tunisia, Tuvalu, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, Uruguay, Vanuatu, The European Union.