

UN Human Rights Council 44: UK's closing statement

The 44th session of the Human Rights Council concluded on Friday 17 June, adopting important resolutions on Syria, Belarus, Eritrea, Discrimination against Women and Girls and other pressing issues. I would like to extend my gratitude to the HRC President and Secretariat for their efforts and creativity that allowed the session to take place smoothly in a hybrid format.

As the international community works together to face the challenges presented by coronavirus (COVID-19), it is crucial that states continue to meet their human rights obligations and take steps to mitigate the disproportionate impact of coronavirus on women and girls, and the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of society, including refugees and members of ethnic, religious and belief minorities, and ensure that they are actively included in response and recovery efforts.

I welcome the Council's adoption of the latest Syria resolution, which focuses on the regime's continued practice of enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention. Given the additional risks posed by coronavirus, the regime must release all those arbitrarily detained.

The resolution also highlights the latest report by the Commission of Inquiry, which found reasonable grounds to believe that war crimes and crimes against humanity had been committed during the military offensive in Idlib. Russia and China's reprehensible use of their vetoes at the Security Council to reduce cross-border aid access into Northern Syria will lead to further loss of life. The resolution rightly demands that the regime and its allies allow urgent, unimpeded, humanitarian access to alleviate the continued suffering of millions of vulnerable Syrians.

The UK delivered a cross-regional joint statement on Hong Kong and Xinjiang on behalf of 28 countries. It is important to bring these issues to the Human Rights Council, given China's ongoing human rights violations in Xinjiang, and the unprecedented nature of China's actions in Hong Kong. As the Prime Minister has said, the imposition of legislation related to national security in Hong Kong is a clear and serious breach of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. The statement also reiterated our shared concerns about Xinjiang, and encouraged the High Commissioner for Human Rights to provide regular information on both situations. I am encouraged that the statement brought together a broad group of states to call on China to uphold its international commitments and human rights obligations.

I also welcome the adoption of the resolution on Eritrea. The UK supports the work of the Special Rapporteur, and I was pleased to see her mandate renewed for another year. I welcome Eritrea's engagement over the past year, but encourage further efforts to make tangible progress on key areas, such as reform of national service, and the implementation of UPR recommendations.

The adoption of the resolution on Belarus ensures that the Belarusian government continues to be held to account for its failure to meet its human rights obligations. I call for the release of those arbitrarily arrested and detained for exercising their right to freedom of expression and assembly as the country prepares for the Presidential election. I also urge Belarus to allow the Special Rapporteur access as a concrete step towards increased international cooperation.

I am pleased that the UK co-sponsored the resolution on the elimination of Female Genital Mutilation. FGM is an extremely harmful practice, causing severe and lifelong physical, psychological and emotional harm to women and girls. The UK is proud to be a leading donor in the effort to support and accelerate the Africa-led movement to end FGM. There is still much more to do and we will continue our work to support the global ambition to end FGM by 2030.

I am also pleased that the UK co-sponsored the resolution on Elimination of Discrimination against Women and Girls. I welcome its recognition of the disproportionate impact of coronavirus on women and girls. We must work together to eliminate discrimination and gender-based violence, and ensure that women's rights, including comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights, are central to the global recovery.

I am pleased that all the amendments that sought to weaken the text failed; it is encouraging to see the international community defend language on women's rights. The UK firmly supports the sexual and reproductive health and rights of all women and girls. Women and girls' control over their own lives and bodies is fundamental to gender equality, and we will continue to work with others to protect this.

I welcome the adoption of the resolution on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, which the UK was pleased to cosponsor. Freedom of opinion and expression are essential in any functioning democracy; people must be allowed to discuss and debate issues freely, and to challenge their governments. During the session we highlighted our concern about the recent ruling in the case of the journalist Maria Ressa in the Philippines.

The Human Rights Council continues to play an essential role in holding to account those who violate or abuse human rights, particularly now, as the coronavirus pandemic brings unprecedented humanitarian challenges and disruption to economies and societies, and has a negative impact on the enjoyment of human rights around the world. As we seek election to the Council later this year, the UK remains strongly committed to supporting the Council and the wider international community in championing human rights.