

## **News story: Foreign Secretary's Easter Sunday op-ed on Christian persecution**

In an op-ed published in the Mail on Sunday, Jeremy Hunt writes that the UK stands in solidarity with persecuted Christians around the world.

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The Easter story begins with persecution but ends in salvation. A man is crucified for his faith, only to rise from the dead and re-join his followers, a miracle that we celebrate today.

But the sombre truth is that millions of Christians will today celebrate Easter while living under a similar shadow of persecution.

Many will be gathering in churches at risk of attack; countless more will have suffered threats or discrimination.

Some Christians will be worshipping at the scene of unspeakable atrocities. St Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Alexandria, Egypt, for example, was the target of a terrorist attack on Palm Sunday in 2017 that killed 17 people.

In the southern Philippines, terrorists planted a bomb in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, claiming 20 lives during mass on January 27 this year.

The world was rightly shocked by the flames destroying Notre-Dame in Paris last week, a tragedy that touched our common humanity. In too many parts of the world, however, it is the congregations themselves who perish.

As the Prince of Wales wrote on Good Friday, there is something inexpressibly tragic about the innocent being murdered because of their faith.

There is a peculiar wickedness about hate-filled extremism that justifies murder because of the God someone chooses to worship. Of all the people who suffer persecution for their faith, it may surprise some to know that the greatest number are Christian.

In total, about 245 million Christians endure oppression worldwide, according to the campaign group Open Doors. And last year more than 4,000 Christians were killed because of their faith.

In 2015, Christians faced harassment from governments or social groups in 128 nations, according to the Pew Research Centre. By 2016, this had risen to 144. China imposes the 'highest levels of government restrictions'.

Should religious persecution matter in an increasingly secular world? The truth is that, if a regime tries to control what you believe, it will generally seek to control every other aspect of your life.

Where Christians are persecuted, other human rights are often brutally abused.

Yet the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, passed by the United Nations General Assembly without a single negative vote in 1948, enshrines 'freedom of thought, conscience and religion'. The declaration makes clear that everyone has a right to the 'practice, worship and observance' of their faith.

Britain has always championed freedom of religion or belief for everyone. In my first weeks as Foreign Secretary I prioritised the plight of the Rohingya Muslims, horrifically targeted by the army of Myanmar (formerly Burma.) But I am not convinced that our efforts on behalf of Christians have always measured up to the scale of the issue.

In the Middle East, for example, the survival of Christianity as a living religion now hangs in the balance. A century ago, about 20 per cent of people in the region were Christians; today the figure is below five per cent.

The bitter irony is that Christianity is retreating in the very region of its birth, where its earliest followers worshipped. Anxious not to offend minorities or appear 'colonialist' in troublespots around the world, British governments have occasionally taken refuge behind the principle that all religions must be protected.

But this must include Christianity, where those targeted are often extremely poor, female and living in or close to poverty.

We must not allow misguided political correctness to inhibit our response. So I have asked Rt Rev'd Philip Mounstephen, the Anglican Bishop of Truro, to conduct an independent review of the Foreign Office's efforts to help persecuted Christians and report back to me later this year.

Questions need answering: do we counter oppression based on religion as forcefully as that based on politics or other characteristics? How can we use the considerable influence the UK has in much of the world to better stand up for religious minorities?

I hope he will recommend practical steps for how the Government might strengthen its response. When I moved house last year, I came across a book that I first read when I was about ten. It was called God's Smuggler by Brother Andrew van der Bijl, a Dutch missionary. At the height of the Cold War, when Christianity was struggling against communist oppression in Central Europe, Brother Andrew began to smuggle Bibles across the Iron Curtain. His book quotes Karl Marx's famous boast about mobilising the letters of the

alphabet to fight ideological battles: 'Give me 26 lead soldiers and I will conquer the world.' Brother Andrew noted how 'this game could be played both ways'. So he set off for Marxist capitals, carrying suitcases packed with Bibles, helping Christians to preserve their faith in defiance of iron-fisted repression.

When I first read God's Smuggler, it was barely possible to hope that the Iron Curtain would one day fall. So when the Berlin Wall dissolved before our eyes in 1989, it was a wonderful blow for freedom, allowing all the European countries that Brother Andrew had visited to win their liberty.

Yet perhaps this good news has made us complacent about problems elsewhere. Exactly 30 years later, 245 million Christians are still at risk. The evidence suggests that far from easing, the burden of worldwide persecution is actually becoming heavier.

So as we celebrate Easter today we must not be indifferent.

This year I marked Lent by writing 40 letters to 40 persecuted Christians or those campaigning on their behalf. My first letter was to Brother Andrew, now 90, assuring him that the UK stands in solidarity with persecuted Christians around the world: 'Freedom of religion or belief is a human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It must be respected. People from all faiths or none should be free to practise as they wish.'

I will continue to make this case for the millions who suffer as a result of their beliefs and British diplomats will continue to be advocates for all those denied the right to practise their faith.

Many of the recipients of those letters, by dint of the danger they are in, should not be named publicly. But they include men and women, clergy and worshippers, who have been personally targeted by terror organisations, had their churches attacked or been imprisoned by draconian regimes.

Britain is on their side. We care about those who stand up for the right to believe and express one's faith, and we care about the decent and humane values that inspire those rights.

I hope that one day letters of this kind will not be necessary.

Until then, everyone of faith should remember persecuted Christians in our Easter prayers and in our actions.

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## **Press release: Phone detection kit**

# introduced in prisons

Specialist mobile detection technology is being used to detect and seize illegal phones used by prisoners, Justice Secretary David Gauke revealed today (Sunday, 21 April).

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## Press release: Phone detection kit introduced in prisons

- Justice Secretary announces new mobile detection technology in prisons
- Will allow prison officers to pinpoint mobile phone signal down to precise cell
- Part of wider efforts to reduce violence and drug use and restore stability to the prison estate

The technology is the latest weapon in the fight against phone smuggling which leads to drug-dealing and violence behind bars.

It works by sending real-time alerts when a mobile is detected in prison, shown on a digital heat map which identifies the strength of the signal. This allows prison officers to pinpoint the location of the phone down to the exact cell.

Staff can also track data over time to watch for patterns emerging, for example when inmates conspire to smuggle drugs into prison. This intelligence is analysed and in conjunction with law enforcement partners can lead to arrests.

Justice Secretary David Gauke said:

As criminals look for new ways to smuggle contraband into prisons, it is vital that we stay one step ahead, and this kind of technology will help prevent them operating from their cells.

This is vital to ensuring prisons are places of safety and rehabilitation, where offenders can turn their backs on crime for good.

Illicit use of phones in prisons to co-ordinate crime fuels high levels of violence as offenders vie for control of the internal market and enforce drug debts. Phones can also be used to terrorise victims and maintain outside criminal networks.

The technology is part of a wider multi-million-pound strategy to restore stability to prisons, with other measures including security scanners, improved searching techniques, phone-blocking technology and a financial crime unit to target the criminal kingpins operating in prisons.

Following a successful six-month trial of the latest technology in one prison, the technology is now in use in five across the country.

There is a direct link between crime on the wings and landings and crime in our towns and cities. Ensuring there is less crime in our prisons means less crime in communities.

Since January last year the Government has invested £70 million in safety, security and decency to help restore stability to the prison estate. On top of this, £14 million is being invested each year to stop criminal gangs smuggling drugs into prisons.

This has come against a backdrop of rising prison officer numbers, with more than 4,700 additional officers recruited since October 2016 and staffing levels at their highest since 2012.

- For security reasons, we cannot disclose the location or further details of the technology.
- The government supported the Interference with Wireless Telegraphy Bill, which received Royal Assent on 20 December 2018. This legislation enables prisons to use interference technology to disrupt mobile telephone signals and prevent illegal use of mobiles by prisoners.

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