

Speech: Supporting Victims of Human Rights Abuses in DRC

Mr President, let me begin by thanking Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Leila Zerrougui and Executive Director of AFIA MAMA, Anny Tenga Modi, for their informative briefings this morning. I will focus my intervention on four issues: human rights, the political situation, the humanitarian situation and MONUSCO.

Mr President, helping survivors of sexual and gender-based violence is a UK priority in the DRC. We welcome the opportunity to hear from Ms Tenga Modi this morning, whose NGO does vital work to empower women, particularly those who are survivors of violence.

In this context, I would like to very briefly raise a project that UK Aid has funded in fifteen villages in the Ituri region, which is working to challenge the social acceptance of violence against women and girls. Over just two years, women's experience of domestic violence fell from 69% to 29%. And the percentage of men reporting that they had carried out domestic violence dropped from 68% to 24% in the same time period. These results show that sexual and gender-based violence can be tackled effectively, even in conflict-related settings.

The UK remains concerned that rape, including mass rape, continues to be used as a weapon of war by armed groups and state actors. The United Kingdom condemns all acts of sexual and gender-based violence, including conflict related sexual violence, and we call upon the new government to deliver on its promises to bring perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence and other human rights abuses to justice.

Mr President, several other delegations this morning have raised the situation in Yumbi. The United Kingdom is deeply concerned about the violence that took place in Yumbi territory in December 2018. The latest report from the United Nations Joint Human Rights Office in DRC suggests that as many as 890 people were killed and thousands more displaced.

We echo the comments made by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet. We condemn all such violence and the perpetrators of these abhorrent crimes must be imminently brought to justice swiftly. Our Embassy in the DRC has raised our concerns with government authorities in the region and with local UN representatives.

Mr President, the United Kingdom remains concerned at the reported discrepancies around the official results for the Presidential, Parliamentary and Provincial elections. Continued efforts for increased transparency and inclusive dialogue with all political parties remain vital as DRC's electoral process continues towards local election in late 2019 and 2020.

The Congolese people clearly voted for change. The United Kingdom will engage

with President Tshisekedi and his team to understand their plans for improving stability and prosperity in the DRC. A stable and prosperous DRC is vital for the Congolese people, for the region and for the rest of the international community.

Mr President, turning to the Ebola outbreak, the United Kingdom commends the response to date, particularly given the challenging environment in which humanitarian and medical are operating. We deplore recent attacks on Ebola treatment centres and those responding to the outbreak. We once again strongly urge all parties to the armed conflict to fully respect international law and ensure full, safe, immediate and unhindered access for humanitarian and medical personnel.

The Government of the DRC has just set out its Ebola response plan until the end of July. It is crucial that the international community steps up to support DRC and curb this outbreak as quickly as possible. The United Kingdom is making a significant contribution to this plan and urges others to do the same.

Finally, as we approach the renewal of the MONUSCO mandate, the United Kingdom agrees that now is the time for the Mission to re-focus on an exit strategy. It is incumbent upon us all to ensure a responsible and sustainable exit of MONUSCO. Therefore, a fully consultative strategic review of the Mission will need to be undertaken before the Council makes a decision on the shape of MONUSCO's exit.

Thank you, Mr President.

Speech: Baroness Williams: LGBT Conference 2019 speech

For most of us, holding our partner's hand is a small, simple act of love, and yet for too many same-sex couples doing so requires asking the questions: Will we be judged? Will we be heckled? Actually will we be attacked?

For most of us, going to the bathroom when out and about is no more complicated than finding the nearest department store. But for Trans men and women it requires planning, risk, and courage.

For most of us, going on holiday is a matter of finding a sunny beach and a cheap flight. But for LGBT people it's also about checking that they won't be thrown in prison for who they are, or who they love.

These are just some of the issues that were raised time and time again by the 108,000 people who responded to last year's survey.

The obstacles that LGBT people face are as varied as the LGBT Community itself. And yet every day, in the face of judgement and intimidation, people stand up to these challenges and meet them head on.

But they shouldn't have to.

Holding your partner's hand should not be an act of defiance. Going to the bathroom should not be an act of bravery. And going on holiday should not mean hiding who you are.

The National LGBT Action Plan provides firm commitments and programmes to tackle many of these issues, but as you will hear today, measuring success is much more than just about statistics. It is about giving people the freedom to live their lives, realise their potential, and love who they love.

This morning, I want to start with the Gender Recognition Act.

We have seen fierce debate on this issue in recent months. And it's right that the Government has listened to every one of those views.

The consultation has now concluded, and around 100,000 people have responded to the consultation. It was an extraordinary response and we are currently analysing the results. We intend to respond on the consultation later this year.

As we always have done, we continue to urge an environment of respect and courtesy as we continue to look at this issue.

As the Minister for Equalities I believe it's important that we look forward and work towards building a more accepting and understanding society.

Last year, LGBT people told us of their challenges accessing appropriate and respectful healthcare. They told us of GPs unaware of the Gender Identity referral process, they told us of trouble accessing appropriate sexual and mental health services, and they told us of their fears of being judged if they disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity to healthcare professionals.

In response to this, we committed to appointing a National Health Adviser who would address LGBT issues at all levels in the NHS. Through their knowledge, drive, and position at the heart of the NHS, they will raise awareness of the obstacles faced by LGBT people in accessing healthcare in a responsive, respectful, and rapid fashion.

Today, I am pleased to announce, although it's been announced several times over the weekend, that we have appointed Dr Michael Brady as the first National LGBT Health Adviser.

If I could tell you a bit about Dr Brady. He is currently the Medical Director of the Terrence Higgins Trust and a sexual health and HIV consultant at King's College Hospital. Sitting in the NHS, he will advise us on issues in healthcare impacting LGBT people, including improving healthcare professionals' awareness of LGBT issues, something which can sometimes be

sadly lacking, the implementation of sexual orientation monitoring across the NHS, and working with statutory and professional organisations to address LGBT issues in physical and mental health services.

Dr Brady will work across the NHS, bringing his passion, skills and enthusiasm to bear in ensuring that the needs of LGBT people are considered at all levels. It is actions such as these that will improve the lives of people across the country in a real, transformational way in years to come. So thank you, Dr Brady, for all you are about to do. And I know you are looking forward to doing it and you will be listening with intent to everything that is said today.

I think we can only improve people's lives by listening to them and understanding the challenges that they face.

It has been this willingness to listen, this exposure and compassion to the experiences of others, that has propelled us as a nation and a society from the virulent homophobia of the 1980s to a world leader on LGBT rights.

So today, I am pleased to announce additional support for supporting LGBT people overseas. We want to champion the rights of LGBT people, not just at home, but across the world where they face such challenges.

The UK believes all people have a right to be included in development, no matter what their background and sexual orientation. The UK Government has a policy of inclusive development for all socially excluded groups.

Discrimination is against the core principles of international development and humanitarian aid. Aid must be impartial and not based on nationality, race, religion, or a political point of view. It must be based on need alone. Discrimination damages not only societies, but actually it holds back economies.

Countries can't fully develop while they oppress minorities. By excluding certain groups countries hold back their potential. Communities are stronger when they stand together and include all their elements.

Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia don't just carry a human cost, they are bad for business as well.

As the President of the World Bank has pointed out, institutional discrimination is bad for economies. When productive people are excluded from the workforce, GDP suffers.

That is why the UK has set up a new funding mechanism – UK AID Connect – to promote LGBT inclusion.

Through this, we are making £12 million available over 4 years for a consortium of diverse organisations – civil society, think tanks and private sector organisations – to work on LGBT inclusion.

We want to build societies where everyone can feel safe and be happy to be who they are, and to love who they love, without judgement or fear. I am

delighted that we are taking steps both at home and abroad to make that a reality.

You, the people in this room, represent the leaders and champions of the LGBT Community. Some of you will have had long careers, fought on many issues, and have more knowledge, experience, and insight than you care to admit.

Others will be fresh faced, with new ideas, new ways of working, and a new perspective.

But one thing that I do not doubt binds everyone in this room together is passion.

A passion to improve the lives of LGBT people. A drive to tackle the issues, seek solutions, and eliminate inequality. And a commitment to see it through to the end.

I share that passion and commitment.

For me, being appointed Minister for Equalities was an opportunity to effect change in the lives of LGBT people, an opportunity I feel privileged to have been afforded.

It has been a learning curve too. Some of the stories that I have heard, and evidence that I have seen has deeply shocked me.

That so-called conversion therapy actually existed at all, was one of those shocks to me. The techniques employed by people who promote these practices are both frightening and tragic. We have already heard from people who have undergone these practices; and they have spoken of the impact it has on them.

If anyone was listening to Desert Island Discs yesterday morning you will have heard Marlon James talking about it, and he didn't even realise it was happening to him.

LGBT people are not broken and they're not ill; they don't need to be cured; and these practices must stop.

We have committed to bringing forward proposals to end these practices for good and we are hard at work developing these proposals, and we will deliver on our commitment.

Which brings me to the LGBT Advisory Panel.

Last year, we launched an open recruitment process for the Panel that would help guide our work and advise us on how to deliver on the commitments in the LGBT Action Plan.

One of their first tasks as a group will be to help us to understand the impact of conversion therapy, and advise us on ways to end the practice.

I am pleased that today we have announced the final membership of the Panel. The 12 appointees as you will see have deep and varied expertise, which

you'll hear more about shortly. You will also have the chance to meet several members of the panel today – as they are here.

Having this panel is really important to the delivery of the Action Plan. Like so much of the progress of LGBT rights and the advancement of it in the UK and abroad, it can't be done just by Government. It is through our partnerships that we progress.

Partnerships like this Advisory Panel. Partnerships like those that we have with organisations that we are funding as part of our new health programme and our anti-bullying programme – that you'll hear more about later today. And finally partnerships with everyone working in the LGBT civil society sector and beyond.

Earlier, you heard updates on the status of the LGBT Action Plan. And whilst you will find the information and workshops that follow valuable, this conference is not just about one document and its impact. Today is an opportunity for you to forge new relationships and build on old ones. To consider new ways of working, to evaluate new priorities and to encounter different points of view.

Your organisations, and indeed you yourselves, will be as varied as the community that you represent. This is a strength to be valued and to draw upon.

Because it is through the strength of our diversity and our unity of purpose, that we can and will achieve our shared ambition; a society where safety, opportunity, and respect are no longer privileges to be fought for, but a reality.

Thank you.

Press release: Engineering first as Dutch flood defence scheme is unveiled in Somerset

The tiny coastal community of Stolford has become the first location in the UK to benefit from innovative flood defence technology pioneered in Holland.

Press release: Engineering first as Dutch flood defence scheme is unveiled in Somerset

Overlooking the Bristol Channel, Stolford has a history of coastal erosion and is prone to flooding. In 1981 high tides overtopped sea defences and flooded 660 hectares of land including 24 properties. Livestock also died. In 1990 a high tide and storms caused further flooding.

There are already coastal defences between Stolford and Hinkley comprising of rock armour and an embankment wall. These defences adjoin a shingle ridge that was prone to serious erosion.

Rising sea levels and more extreme weather conditions have made the ridge and embankment increasingly vulnerable to erosion and increased the risk of a breach. The Environment Agency previously spent £50,000 a year replenishing the ridge with 15,000 tonnes of shingle.

Conventional rock armour, also known as rock revetment, would have been too costly and visually intrusive. In addition, the transportation of rock armour would have caused excessive disturbance from heavy lorries travelling in narrow lanes to a remote coastal location.

It was decided the best solution was a Dutch system known as Hillblock, a type of block revetment, that uses a series of specially-shaped concrete blocks. Storm waves flow over the structure and enter a network of cavities between the blocks that absorb wave energy.

Shaped like champagne corks, the blocks are made from high density concrete and held in place by steel piles and concrete kerbs. Although extremely heavy, each block is designed to move slightly. The technology has been used extensively in coastal defences in Holland.

The Hillblock revetment

The Hillblock system significantly reduces wave run-up which means the height of the defences can be reduced compared to conventional systems, hence reducing the quantity of construction material required, costs and carbon dioxide.

The Stolford scheme will provide a higher standard of flood protection to 20 properties, the village access road and approximately 70 hectares of agricultural land. It will be officially opened on Monday 18 March 2019 at 12.00.

John Curtin, Executive Director of Flood and Coastal Risk Management at the Environment Agency, said:

This is an exciting engineering first for UK – the new technology installed at Stolford can reduce wave energy by up to 30 per cent compared to the shore protection traditionally used. It will provide valuable protection to this Somerset community and the surrounding agricultural land.

It is also a great example of our joint work with the Dutch government, with whom we have a long history of mutual sharing of knowledge and best practice in the management of floods and climate change.

Nol Vincent, Environment Agency project manager, said:

The use of an innovative and proven Dutch system at Stolford has enabled us to deliver an economic alternative to rock armour at this remote location on the Somerset coastline.

The £1.5 million scheme has been funded by the Wessex Regional Flood and Coastal Committee through the Local Levy and the new Hinkley Point Nuclear Power Station currently under construction on the same stretch of Somerset coastline.

The Dutch government contributed £100,000 under the Partners for Water Scheme which supports the use of Dutch water management innovations worldwide with the aim of improving global resilience while supporting Dutch businesses. Hinkley Point Nuclear Power Station contributed £81,631 under an agreement known as the Stolford Flood Mitigation Fund.

The design of the scheme will allow the shingle ridge and adjoining common land, that make up the foreshore and intertidal area, to return to a natural state. It also allows for continued public access along the embankment and foreshore and will help preserve the existing wildlife habitat behind the embankment and remove the need to keep replenishing the shingle ridge.

Press release: Top computer scientist chosen to lead National Centre for Computing Education

Leading computer scientist Simon Peyton Jones appointed chair of new National Centre for Computing Education.