

Lord Ahmad addresses 43rd Session of the UN Human Rights Council

Madame President, Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Before I begin, I want to offer my deepest sympathies, on behalf of the United Kingdom, to all those affected by Covid-19 in China and elsewhere. The international community must work together to better understand the threat we face, and to take the most effective action. The UK will play our part.

Madame President, 75 years ago, in the aftermath of a most appalling conflict, the architects of the UN charter carved out three pillars of cooperation with which we could all build a better, safer, and more equal future.

Today, the United Kingdom remains steadfastly committed to working with all of you to maintain peace and security, foster development, and promote and protect human rights, just as the authors of the Charter envisaged.

Madame President, they knew that states that respect human rights create the conditions for societies that are more secure, more prosperous, and better equipped to meet the needs of their people. That is why, to this day, respect for human rights remains at the heart of the international system.

And it is why, in 2020, and beyond, the UK will place the promotion and protection of human rights at the top of our list of international priorities.

As a global force for good, we will continue to uphold and defend the international rule of law, the values of liberal democracy, and the rights and freedoms of citizens around the world.

As a demonstration of that commitment to international human rights, the UK will seek re-election to the Council later this year.

As our then Foreign Secretary, now Prime Minister, said to this Council in June 2018, we could solve many of the world's most serious problems, and achieve virtually every sustainable development goal by 2030, if every girl in the world had at least 12 years of quality education. We will strain every sinew to achieve that goal, while also striving to end sexual violence in conflict, and violence against women and girls.

We also pledge to stand up for freedom of expression, thought, conscience, and religion or belief; to defend media freedom, stand up for journalists and other media workers, and support other civil society groups that hold the powerful to account.

In that regard, I commend to this Council the statement published today by the Media Freedom Coalition, co-chaired by the United Kingdom and Canada. The statement outlines the collective intent of Coalition members to take action

on individual cases and situations of concern, to speak out publicly and to provide support for those advocating for media freedom.

The United Kingdom will also implement a new autonomous human rights sanctions regime to punish those who violate and abuse human rights.

Finally, as co-host of this year's crucial UN Climate Summit, we will strive to raise global ambitions and commitments on tackling climate change, and its potential impacts on the enjoyment of human rights.

Madame President, despite the commitment and efforts of many in this chamber, we know that millions of people around the world continue to be deprived of their rights and freedoms. In Syria, human rights continue to be violated and abused every day, with the regime the main perpetrator. We are gravely concerned about the reckless offensive by Syrian and Russian forces in Idlib, in which hospitals, schools and first responders have all come under attack. Those responsible for violations of international humanitarian law must be held to account.

In Myanmar and Bangladesh, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims and other ethnic minorities, many of whom have survived violence, including sexual violence, remain stranded far from home.

The authorities in Myanmar must implement the provisional measures required by the International Court of Justice, together with the recommendations made by the Rakhine Advisory Commission, and the Independent Commission of Enquiry.

In Iran in November, we saw the most deadly crackdown against internal political dissent since 1979, and a near-total shutdown of the internet. Faith groups have also been targeted. We urge the Iranian authorities to release those detained, and to respect freedom of expression, religion or belief.

In North Korea, reports of serious and wide-ranging human rights violations continue to emerge. We again call on the North Korean government to work with the Council to address them.

Finally, in China, over a million Uyghurs have been extra judicially detained, and there are systematic restrictions on Uyghur culture and the practice of Islam. We call on China to allow the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights unfettered access to the region.

Madame President. There are times when the human rights picture across the world looks bleak; when the violations and abuses we see are too heart breaking; when the challenges for this Council seem too great.

At such times, when we doubt our ability to achieve our goals, we must remember all that we have achieved together over the last 75 years, from the bleakest of beginnings. Together, we have built a human rights framework based on the principle that 'all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights'; a system that can hold the perpetrators of the worst human rights violations and abuses to account; and, importantly, a system

that can support governments across the world to improve their human rights record.

So, in the face of every new challenge, we should not lose heart. We should recognise the great value of this Council and the wider human rights system, and encourage all states to engage openly with it.

Above all, we should remember the individuals around the world whose rights and freedoms are violated and abused – the world's most vulnerable people, who rely on this Council to expose their suffering.

By working together, in this Chamber and beyond, we will ensure that they and others can enjoy their human rights, can live in safety and freedom, and can contribute to the wellbeing and prosperity of their country and the wider world.

That is surely a goal that we should all continue to fight for. The United Kingdom is committed to doing just that – today, tomorrow and into the future.

Thank you.