

Speech: Annual Human Rights Day reception 2017: Lord Ahmad's speech

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, welcome to you all to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. It's an honour indeed to welcome such strong advocates on this important issue to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

In particular, I would like to thank Mervyn Thomas from [Christian Solidarity Worldwide](#) and also welcome both Tina and Alissa to the panel, and I look forward to working with all of you, indeed everyone in this room, on this important issue.

I am also delighted to acknowledge that we are joined this morning by my colleague and friend, Minister of State [Lord Bates](#), who is the Minister of State at the Department for International Development. Michael and I have been working on this agenda and others, hand in glove, and I think it underlines the importance that we in the government, are attaching to cross-Whitehall working.

I am also delighted to welcome the Chairman of the APPG Baroness Fiona Hodgson to the room, and there are others in this room who know that faith is part and centre of the challenges we face, and it is important to ensure the voice of the oppressed, the voice of those who don't have a voice, is heard.

Importance of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)

And therefore, we all ask the question, why does freedom of religion or belief matter? It matters simply because the short answer is that religion itself matters to a huge number of people. To us in this room and beyond.

According to the Pew Research Centre, religious faith guides the daily life of more than 80% of the world's population. I was once asked very recently, about the importance and priorities that I lay in my own life, and I mentioned 2 things beginning with F – family and faith. Because I think these are the things which transcend all professions, all walks of life, and they are important in what defines us.

As a man of faith myself, religion certainly does matter to me. So does the freedom to practice my faith without fear of discrimination or persecution. I am proud to be Minister of a country, born and bred in a country where I can do just that.

When I travel around the world, I say this, that Britain is the best place to be a Muslim. It is the best place to be a Christian, a Jew, a Sikh, a Hindu, a Buddhist or whatever faith you choose to follow, or indeed if you have no faith. Because that is what defines our country. The strength of our diversity, the strength of our communities. The strength of our faith communities, and those of no faith.

The freedoms enjoyed here in the United Kingdom by people of all faiths and none, I believe passionately, should be enjoyed by everyone, everywhere.

This matters not only because of the importance of religion in and of itself. It also matters, ladies and gentlemen, because promoting tolerance, actually not just tolerance, but understanding and respect for all, helps to create a platform for a stable and prosperous society.

By ensuring that everyone can contribute, society as a whole is better off. There is also clear evidence to suggest that the tolerant and inclusive societies are better equipped to resist extremism. Those of you who know me know that I feel very passionately about this issue of tackling radicalisation and extremism. Because if we can tackle extremism at its origin, we will be able to deal with the challenges of terrorism that we face, not just in our own country, but around the world.

For all these reasons, freedom of religion or belief is vitally important. It is essential.

Nevertheless, as we all know, religious persecution, which has caused conflict and intolerable human suffering for centuries, has tragically still not been consigned to the history books. In many parts of the world, and for many people of faith, it remains an everyday reality.

States not meeting obligations

70 years on since the adoption of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), as we look around the globe, far too many states are still failing to protect all their citizens' rights to worship freely. They are failing to prevent religious discrimination, failing to ensure people of all faiths and none are protected by the law.

In some cases, states are acting in even more harmful ways than they did before. They are not only failing to protect the rights of religious minorities, they are actively contributing to the suppression and violation of those rights. This is a reality for many across the world today, the Assyrian Christians of Iraq; the Rohingya Muslims of Burma; the Baha'is in Iran; the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia to name but a few.

All are being failed by the very people whose responsibility it is to protect them.

The responsibility was set out in the Universal Declaration and enshrined into law under the [International Convention on Civil and Political Rights](#). All states party to that Convention must protect people in their jurisdiction from discrimination, protect their right to worship freely, change their religion – often a crime in many parts of the world, or have no religion, and to have the right, if you have no faith, to be equally protected as citizens of a country.

On behalf of the British government I call on all states party to that International Convention to uphold these binding principles.

Government action

Our government, led by our Prime Minister Mrs May, has made this a key priority. Our Prime Minister herself has spoken of the need to “stand up for people of all religions to practice their beliefs in peace and safety”.

That is why I have asked our global diplomatic network to prioritise this critical area of work. This effort takes a number of forms: from direct diplomacy to project work; from multilateral consensus building to collaboration with faith leaders. And I am delighted that we are joined by His Grace Bishop Angaelos and I know and appreciate and thank you for the work you do as well.

Bilateral action

Our commitment to this issue also means that we directly engage and lobby at the highest levels of government on behalf of persecuted minorities. Let me just give you some current examples.

In Burma, UK ministers have raised our deepest [concerns about the persecution of Rohingya Muslims](#) with both the civilian government and the military authorities. As the United Nations have said, they have called this a classic case of ethnic cleansing of a community.

We have pressed them to enable refugees to return in safety and to investigate allegations of human rights abuses. We are not alone in this. We are working together with other international partners. This bilateral lobbying is complemented by our work at the UN as well. And indeed, I am working very closely with Special Representative Pramila Patten on this very issue.

And last week, [I attended a Special Session of the Human Rights Council](#) in Geneva, which focused specifically on the plight of the Rohingya Muslims. We have also expressed to the Burmese authorities our concern over the intimidation faced by Christians in Chin, Kachin and Kayin States. I was pleased to host a roundtable with faith and civil society leaders in October looking at how we can work together to protect freedom of religion or belief in Burma.

Reflecting, when I look at religion, and religion is often to blame, I say do not blame the faith, do not blame the religion. There are those who claim to follow a particular faith, yet they don't follow it. They hijack it, misrepresent it and use it in a way that is to justify their own heinous crimes. That must end.

And, this is not just in Burma, but in other parts of the world. Most recently, we have had discussions with Pakistan's Human Rights Ministry. Our Minister for Asia Mark Field recently raised the discrimination suffered by Christian communities, and the Ahmadiyya communities. And I also made sure that this was the focus of the UK's response on Pakistan's Universal Period Review at the [Human Rights Council in November](#), where we asked for an

electoral register free of religious bias.

Yet tragically, recent events in that very country demonstrate how much more work is still to be done. In Eritrea, we called on the government to release all prisoners detained for their religious beliefs, including the Orthodox Patriarch, Abune Antonios. And as we look out to the Middle East, the persecution of religious minorities by Daesh, including the Yazidis, was there for all to see, and has been particularly horrifying.

But, ladies and gentlemen, the UK has played a leading role in the international campaign to defeat Daesh on the battlefield. And only this weekend, we saw the Iraqi Prime Minister acknowledge that Daesh had been defeated in Iraq as well.

We must now continue to work to hold them to account and to fight for justice for those who have suffered, not just in Iraq and Syria, but also those around the world who have been victims of terrorist attacks in an indiscriminate fashion. And that is why the UK has committed £1 million to help set up a UN special investigation team. Starting in Iraq, this team will collect, preserve and store evidence of crimes committed by Daesh, so that we can bring them to justice. The team will be led by a Special Adviser with a mandate to promote this goal around the world.

Defeating Daesh and holding them to account is just the start of our campaign to defend freedom of religion or belief in the Middle East. The next step is to work with our Iraqi allies to ensure that they remain committed to protecting the rights of religious minorities across the country.

Multilateral work

More broadly, we will also work with our international partners to ensure that the obligation to defend freedom of religion or belief is woven ever deeper into the fabric of international relations. An important element of this remains our work to maintain consensus on freedom of religion or belief in key resolutions – principally at the United Nations – but also in the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Cooperation and Security in Europe.

Projects

Another diplomatic tool at our disposal is our project work through the Magna Carta Fund. One of those projects supports the work of Hardwired Inc in promoting religious tolerance in both Morocco and Lebanon, and we will hear about that from Tina Ramirez shortly, and I pay tribute to their work in this respect.

Work with faith actors

The other important strand of our human rights work, is one that I have given particular priority to, is collaboration. Yes, we talk about international action, but we must take communities with us. That's why many of you know

that I have put particular emphasis on collaboration with faith leaders and religious representatives. This cooperation is hugely beneficial to our work, which is why I have established a regular roundtable with a changing cast of faith leaders and civil society representatives to address the issues in front of us.

This is an opportunity to discuss important foreign policy topics from a different perspective, and provides a platform for dialogue on how government can work better with faith groups to find solutions to international challenges. The second of these roundtable takes place tomorrow, when we will look at the role of women in tackling religiously motivated violent extremism.

On that point, I have been astounded at times about the lack of women being represented. When we are looking at issues of peace, resolving conflict, and yes, dealing with violent extremism, all too often I enter a room and I say this as a man, myself, that when I look around the table, to try and resolve these issues, trying to meet the challenges, and look for practical solutions, there are only men in the room.

That is not acceptable and therefore we must need to tackle that head on. Therefore, I have been recently also promoting the importance of women being part and parcel of tackling the issues and challenges that we face around countering violent extremism.

Conclusion

In a moment I will hand over to Mervyn Thomas, but before I do so, I look around this room and see many friends, many people I work with, have previously worked with, and continue to work with today, and I look forward to working with you all in our tomorrows.

But in doing so, may I thank you on behalf of our Prime Minister, on behalf of the Foreign Secretary, and all across government for your commitment, your determination, your perseverance, often I know, in challenging situations. But your perseverance, ladies and gentlemen, is showing dividends and together in a collaborative fashion, we can achieve so much more.

As Minister of State at the Foreign Office, responsible for Human Rights, I assure you I am absolutely determined to ensure that the UK is doing all it can to promote, protect, sustain and strengthen freedom of religion or belief around the world. I know that we have the political will, the people and the influence necessary to make progress. And with your support, your collaboration, the strength of your organisations and your networks, I am confident we will deliver and we will succeed.

Thank you.