

Speech: Launch of the Independent Review into the Persecution of Christians across the Globe: Foreign Secretary's Speech

Archbishop, bishop, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, a very warm welcome this morning to this very important occasion and very significant launch.

Last Sunday, many people here will have been going to church, as indeed was the case in the Philippines at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in the Southern Philippines. And in the middle of that service, a bomb exploded and 20 people were killed and the perpetrators then issued a hate-filled statement labelling the Cathedral as a 'crusader temple'.

And this was a very vivid reminder of the terrible truth that freedom of worship is something that cannot only not be taken for granted, but is a growing concern all over the world.

And what happened in the Philippines has happened in Egypt. We know now from the excellent Open Doors report that a quarter of a billion Christians are suffering some sort of persecution all over the world, and we know that a number of the countries where this happens are countries that we don't necessarily talk about.

Countries like Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, Libya, North Korea, but also in some of the bigger countries.

We know that there are serious and growing issues in China. And also in countries where we might have hoped there wouldn't be a serious issue, like India, we know that this is becoming a much bigger issue.

And as me and my team at the Foreign Office reflected on this, we wanted to ask ourselves a question as to whether the FCO, which has one of the best global networks of any diplomatic service – we basically after the Americans and the Chinese have the third biggest diplomatic network of any country alongside the French – and we wanted to ask ourselves a question as to whether we really are doing as much as we possibly could.

And we wanted to do this not just because freedom of worship is a fundamental human right, but because also freedom of worship is the invisible line between open societies and closed societies.

Where freedom of worship is hampered or prevented, then usually that's a sign of lots of other things going wrong, and we wanted to make sure that the UK is doing everything to champion the values that we all believe in.

I am a Johnny-come-lately to this, because we have in the Foreign Office a

fantastic minister, Lord Ahmad, who has been championing religious freedom since before I became Foreign Secretary, and himself comes from a Muslim minority faith – the Ahmadiyya community that have effectively been banished from Pakistan because it's not safe for them to be in Pakistan, and have had to move away. And many of them are based in the UK, but actually all over the world, so this is someone who knows from his own life the dangers.

But very much on his advice, we particularly want to look at the issue of Christian persecution.

Because the evidence is that 80 per cent of all the people who are suffering religious persecution are Christian.

And we want to, if I can put it this way, banish any hesitation to look into this issue without fear or favour that may exist because of our imperial history, because of the concerns that some people might have in linking the activities of missionaries in the nineteenth century to misguided imperialism. And all those concerns may have led to a hesitation to really look at this issue properly, and we don't want that to happen.

And in order to keep us on the straight and narrow I've asked the Bishop of Truro, Bishop Philip Mounstephen, to do an independent review, and to work with all of you, to work with the FCO, and to tell us how we should approach this and what more we can do.

And what I want to do is, what I'm hoping the outcome of this will be is, first of all in practical terms, I want to make absolutely sure when I am meeting a foreign minister, a prime minister or a president in another country, and there's an issue concerning religious freedom, and in particular the rights of Christians, I want to make sure that it is absolutely on my list of things that I need to raise.

Sometimes you do these things publically, sometimes you do them privately, but we should always be doing them if they need to be done and I want to make sure that happens and I don't think it does at the moment.

But secondly, I want to see what we can do to build an international coalition of countries that are concerned about this so that we can play, I think the role that Britain has played for many years, which is whilst recognising that we're not a superpower, at the same time, not underestimating the power and influence that we have as a very well-connected country to bring together other countries that share our values and give a voice to people who don't have a voice.

And I think the final point I want to make which everyone in this room will be well aware of, but I'm not sure necessarily that the public outside are: we are a wealthy country and we sometimes think that when it comes to the rights of Christians this is really about wealthy people.

It isn't.

The people who are suffering are some of the poorest people on the planet and they happen to have the faith that I have, that many people here have, and

they happen to be suffering very badly for it.

There is sometimes good news.

I think the news about Asia Bibi this week is extremely encouraging, but the truth is that unless we make a real effort and unless the world knows that we are making a real effort, those bits of good news will become the exception and not the rule. And that's what we don't want to allow to happen.

So thank you very much for your support.

I'm sure, I say this in advance as a bit of expectation-setting, I'm sure we won't be able to do absolutely everything you want, Philip, but we are very, very serious about doing what we can and we're incredibly grateful for the support of many people here and many people outside as we in the Foreign Office go on a journey and think really hard about what we could do better.

Thank you very much.