

Speech: Lord Ahmad speech: International Human Rights Day 2018

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon to you all and a warm welcome to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and thank you Richard for your introduction.

When we look across the world, in headquarters of global institutions and in government ministries like this one, in the homes and offices of activists, and in classrooms and places of worship, today marks one of those days where people are coming together to mark Human Rights Day – 70 years to the day when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed.

But let us reflect on the last 70 years. 70 years ago the world was still reeling from global conflict. It was a world of families shattered by death, by destruction: a world in which people everywhere were calling on those in power to find peaceful ways to resolve their differences to show respect and understanding towards each other.

So when the United Nations was still only two years old, 48 leaders of the most forward looking nations sought to do just that. They came together to proclaim the rights that every person should enjoy, each and every one of us should enjoy, regardless of age, regardless of their place of birth, their position in society, their faith, their religion, their race, their creed, their political views.

It was a bold aspiration and a courageous one, because so many of the two billion people on earth at that time did not enjoy these fundamental rights.

Let's fast forward 70 years, and I am amongst other things the Minister for the United Nations as well. And whilst our work continues on this important agenda there is no better word for it than a tragedy; the tragedy that today, in 2018, despite the progress that has been made in the seven decades after that Declaration was signed, millions, and yes it is millions as we all know to be true, still cannot rely on their governments, their communities, to protect their basic human rights.

That is why it is so important that all of us, each and every one of us who are committed to securing human rights for everyone, keeps coming together, keeps working together, to bring about a better future for all. You heard Richard say at the start, and it was quite deliberate on my part, that as a Minister, it is not me shying away from the questions. It is about hearing directly from the human rights defenders, those involved on the front line.

Human Rights Defenders

And I am delighted and honoured to be joined by the panel who represent such human rights defenders, who, like many in this room and tens of thousands of others around the world, dedicate their time, their efforts, their energy showing, great courage and great risk to their personal lives at times and

great risk to the lives of their families.

It is poignant we focus on human rights defenders today, because yesterday was also the 20th Anniversary of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which is why we chose to celebrate their work at the event this year.

Our panellists will tell you themselves about their work in a moment, but I'd like to introduce them briefly if I may, before I give a brief overview of some of our work from a British perspective on this important agenda on Human Rights, which I will also add is very close to my heart.

As we have already heard from Richard, we are joined by Dina Meza). She is a journalist in Honduras who is working to defend freedom of expression and information. And in case Dina, and after meeting her this morning, I would add this, a modest lady, and if she fails to tell you this herself is that she was named by Fortune magazine as one of the world's 50 greatest leaders of 2018. Why? Because of her work in this sphere. Thank you Dina for being here.

Another human rights defender joins us from a country I visited recently, Kenya. Wanjari Nderu has created a network of civil society volunteers – including many lawyers and professionals – who use social media to defend the human rights of those who are less able to defend themselves. Welcome to you as well, Wanjari.

And I am also proud to welcome once again, someone I describe not just as someone who leads the charge on human rights defenders, but if I may say, someone who acts and provides sound advice, my good friend Kate Allen. Welcome Kate, who as many of us know champions the work of human rights, including as Director of Amnesty International UK, for the last 18 years. Thank you all for joining us here this afternoon.

The UK's Human Rights Work

I hope you will also agree, as I look around the audience, that the UK government has been a champion of human rights, fundamental freedoms, and democratic values. Let me assure you this will continue to be an absolutely integral part of what we do in Government as part of British foreign policy.

There are times, as I am sure you will all agree, for quiet diplomacy. But there are times for vocal campaigns, such as the call by our Prime Minister, Mrs May, on the ending modern slavery and human trafficking, to prevent sexual violence in conflict, or to ensure at least 12 years of quality education for every girl around the globe – our work, ladies and gentlemen, gives real momentum to a wide range of individual cases and indeed global issues.

In this respect, in the summer of this year, I was humbled and deeply honoured when the Prime Minister asked me to take on an additional role, as her Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Last month working with colleagues across the Department for International Development we announced a new programme of £12 million of Government funding and support programmes to

support our shared vision of a world where people with different beliefs or no beliefs truly respect each other.

This is a responsibility I cherish, because when you look at the issue of Freedom of Religion or Belief, it is not just about the challenges we see abroad, regrettably, we still see these challenges on a domestic front; the rising tide of anti-Semitism both here and in Europe, and the issues of rising religious hate crime against minority communities. It is only through collective and collaborative action that we will not only face up to it, but we will defeat such divisive voices and actions.

My new role is a responsibility I greatly cherish and in recent months I have used it to promote the benefits of religious diversity around the world – recently in October I visited Indonesia; to raise our concerns directly with governments – I have also had the opportunity, amongst others, Sudan; and to convene conversations between leaders of all faiths – as I did in Israel earlier in the year, and as I do regularly through faith tables right here in London. I am delighted to see Archbishop Angaelos join us, who has been a constant support and friend in this respect. Thank you Archbishop for your support.

A failure to respect our differences while recognising and celebrating our common humanity is at the root of so many of today's human rights abuses, and so many instances of the abuse of power. The United Kingdom government promotes good governance, for example through the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, and through our membership of the Community of Democracies, a grouping which we currently chair.

And as we use our position as a global leader to oppose the death penalty and to speak out against torture wherever it exists. Today also marks the close of 16 days of activism to end gender-based violence.

Ladies and gentlemen when you look around the world, it is unacceptable, it is tragic that one in three women, one in three women will experience physical or sexual violence in her lifetime – that is abuse on a truly, truly appalling scale.

In conflict situations, as I have seen myself through meeting some incredible women, courageous survivors both women and girls, but also men and boys, who experience violence and sexual abuse in even greater numbers.

This year, to mark the 16 days of activism on the issue, I was proud to host a film festival in London to draw attention to the experiences of survivors, through their direct sharing of experiences, about the appalling crime that is sexual violence in conflict. And also importantly to fight the important issue of stigma. Why should it be that these victims, who suffer the most horrendous crimes against their person, then not only have to relive that experience, but are then rejected by their very communities, at a time when they need their greatest support.

We must come together, stand united, to ensure not only are their rights protected, not only are perpetrators brought to account, but also that they

are given the support they need to rebuild their lives.

The film festival began the countdown to the International Conference which the British Government will be hosting next year in November 2019, to mobilise the international community into further action.

Those who shine a light on the perpetrators of human rights violations and abuses are another increasingly vulnerable group.

Which is why the Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, is launching a new global campaign next year to champion media freedom, and to support journalists and campaigners who expose discrimination, corruption and injustice.

I am also delighted to report today that next June the United Kingdom will take over as co-chair of the Equal Rights Coalition, a grouping of 40 countries working together towards LGBT equality. This is an important area of our human rights work and we are particularly pleased that Argentina will partner us as the second co-chair.

Ladies and gentlemen those of you who have worked with me, know how close this issue is to the work I do. But I do so only as effectively as the deep collaborative partnerships and friendships that the Foreign Office has fostered with many of you in this room and beyond.

Conclusion I am proud, as the minister within the Foreign Office to be responsible for human rights. I am deeply humbled that by God's grace, I live in a country that not only respects but protects by law, the human rights of its citizens. But there is always work to be done.

But equally, I am proud and honoured to represent a country, the United Kingdom, that is committed to supporting, promoting and protecting the human rights of all people around the world.

It is a great honour to support the brave and committed people who carry out this most important of work, often at great personal risk. People like those on the panel today and those we are about to see on video; examples of human rights defenders drawn from Malawi, Mexico, Sierra Leone and the Philippines.

Ladies and gentlemen, today, on the 70th anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights, and indeed the 20th anniversary of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, let me take this opportunity on behalf of Her Majesty's Government to thank all of you, the panellists and those incredible and all human rights defenders around the world. We thank them for all their work on all aspects of this important agenda for their courage, their dedication, their devotion and incredible determination.

Let me say this to conclude, that we commit to continue strengthening our support for them as we collectively strive to build a better world.

I am not for a moment entertaining that this is an easy job; it is not. On a moment of personal reflection, when I meet with victims and survivors who have suffered the worst kind of human abuses against them, is both the heart-rendering moments, but then you reach deep; you reach deep into your own

experience, you reach deep into the friendships that you have fostered over a number of years and you reach deep into the relationships that we have, with like-minded individuals, communities, groups and organisations around the world.

Sitting back and saying, "Isn't this terrible, what more can be done?" On a point of personal reflection, more can be done and often the question lies within yourself.

Because, if we collectively do more we will be able to start making the kind of differences we all wish to see. One of my biggest heroes in my life, who shaped many things in how I looked at the world was Ghandi. He famously said that "we must become the change we wish to see". Let us become that change, let us ensure we stand up with passion, with vigour, with commitment and emulate the bravery of human rights defenders around the world to ensure that we play our part, not just in government or leaders of NGOs and civil societies, but we play our part as human beings to ensure that we can live and say that we did our part in the defence and declaration of that Declaration envisaged all those years ago.