

Continued suppression of protests in the Russian Federation and the sentencing of Alexey Navalny: UK statement

Mr Chair,

The UK calls for the immediate and unconditional release of Alexey Navalny and all peaceful protesters and journalists arrested during the last two weeks by the Russian authorities.

The UK is worried by Mr Navalny's sentencing. The perverse ruling of 2 February targets the victim of a poisoning with a banned chemical weapon rather than those responsible, and shows Russia's failure to meet the most basic commitments expected of any responsible member of the international community. It also raises concern over the independence of the judiciary and wider rule of law in Russia. It is deplorable that Mr Navalny is being detained in relation to court decisions which the European Court of Human Rights determined to be arbitrary and manifestly unreasonable.

Furthermore, the UK is disappointed by the Russian MFA spokesperson's claim that the presence of foreign diplomats at the court was evidence of interference. This unfounded claim is particularly disappointing given the commitment of all OSCE participating States to accept each other's' representatives as court observers as a confidence building measure, adopted in the OSCE Copenhagen Document.

Mr Chair,

As stated at last week's Permanent Council, a free and independent media is a cornerstone of any democratic society. We are appalled by the Russian authorities' use of violence and arbitrary arrest of peaceful protesters and journalists. This continued violent suppression of individual expression is unacceptable. These events confirm a continuous negative pattern of shrinking space for the opposition, civil society, human rights defenders and independent voices in Russia. Russia must respect its citizens' right to freedom of expression, adhere to its national and international obligations and release those detained arbitrarily for exercising their right of peaceful assembly.

Once more, we call on Russia to demonstrate its commitment to its international obligations, including its commitments in the OSCE, to release all those detained during peaceful demonstrations, and to release Mr Navalny without delay.

Recent developments in Belarus: UK statement, 4 February 2021

Mr Chair,

It was almost six months ago to the day that the Belarusian people went to the polling stations to vote for their choice of President. But this election, like many others in Belarus, was neither free nor fair, nor did it meet international standards. Opposition candidates were arrested and their supporters detained; domestic and international independent observers, were unable to monitor, with the invitation to Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) issuing too late; votes were rigged and counts and results falsified.

ODIHR had reported the shortcomings of previous Belarusian parliamentary and presidential elections. But this time the people of Belarus demanded change. They wanted their votes to count. They wanted to participate. That is the essence of democracy and for which this organisation is here to develop, to support and to protect. They used the only means at their disposal, to go out on to the streets and demonstrate. When they did so, they did so peacefully and it has been a mark of the demonstrations ever since that they are peaceful and orderly.

The response from the Belarusian authorities over the past 6 months has been tough to witness – tens of thousands arbitrarily detained, with at least five fatalities; the offices of independent media organisations raided; journalists attacked and arrested; all leading opposition figures either exiled or imprisoned on trumped up charges; opposition signs banned; internet access regularly shut down and appalling reports of torture, cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment inside detention centres. All the while, the authorities have acted with impunity and without any attempt to investigate any of the allegations.

Mr Chair,

The UK has spoken out about the situation repeatedly. We will continue to do so. We have acted correctly, both with partners in invoking the OSCE's Moscow Mechanism and in holding those responsible for human rights violations to account through sanctions. The Belarusian authorities have complained that this is interference in their internal affairs. That is not the case. As an OSCE participating State, Belarus freely entered into commitments to uphold human rights and fundamental freedoms. It has failed to do so, and it is right that it is held to account for those failings. The UK will continue to act to uphold our shared commitments at the OSCE and in defence of the Rules Based International System, which exists to protect us all.

Throughout the last six months, the Belarusian government has ignored calls

from its own people and the international community to engage in peaceful and inclusive national dialogue to help resolve the situation. Belarusians are calling for their democratic rights to be respected through new elections, which are free and fair. It is difficult to see how there can be any substantive proposals towards a democratic solution when there are now over 200 political prisoners in jail and key opponents exiled from their country.

Mr Chair,

The UK stands in solidarity with those calling for democratic change in Belarus. I use this opportunity today, to remind the Belarusian authorities that there is a roadmap out of the crisis – release those arbitrarily detained, release all those held on political grounds, allow those in exile to return, stop attacking independent media, properly investigate the allegations of abuse including torture, and engage with OSCE partners in implementing the recommendations in Professor Benedek's report in full.

M6 milestone after weekend closures

Highways England is constructing a bridge over the M6 at junction 19 at Knutsford to improve traffic flow between the motorway and the A556 and reduce congestion around the junction roundabout.

Work to lift dozens of steel bridge beams into place over the motorway was completed on Monday 1 February with the M6 re-opening after two successive weekend closures. A drone video released today shows how much progress was made during the work.

January's torrential rain damaged Acton Bridge along the A49 over the River Weaver near Northwich and meant plans to use a long-standing A54 and A49 diversion route during the Friday and Sunday night closures had to be altered at the last minute. Highways England had to use the A50 instead, prompting a 'thank you' message to residents.

Highways England project manager Khalid El-Rayes said:

"During the first weekend we were forced to change the diversion route at very short notice. Last week, when it became clear the bridge would not be repaired in time, we worked hard to advise local people we'd be using the A50 again, including writing to about 800 householders along the route.

"We would like to thank people in Holmes Chapel, Knutsford and everyone along the A50 for their patience and support over the last couple of weekends. They have helped us reach a significant milestone in this important project to provide smoother, safer and more reliable journeys for local people and everyone else relying on what is one of the busiest junctions in the North West."

The work to crane the 18 pairs of 40 tonne bridge beams – each up to 42 metres in length – into place over the motorway involved 100 contractors delivering some 12,000 hours of activity safely. Over the two weekends, United Utilities staff were also involved in completing a water mains diversion at the roundabout as part of the overall project.

Pictures from a drone show how much progress was made during the two weekend motorway closures

Pat Cumming, senior project manager for AmeySRM which is the lead contractor on the Highways England M6 Junction 19 project, said:

This was a tremendous achievement and a real team effort. I'm extremely proud of everyone involved. We will continue to work together safely and efficiently to deliver the project with minimal disruption to Highways England customers.

Highways England revealed today it had also used the two weekend closures to do routine motorway maintenance away from the bridge site – with vegetation clearance, gully cleaning and litter picking among the tasks completed and reducing the need for lane and carriageway closures in the area at other times. Features of the operation over the two weekends included:

- Clearing or cutting overgrown vegetation and trees along 26 miles
- Cleaning almost 500 gullies, 108 manholes and more than two miles of drainage
- Removing 200 tonnes of silt along about 12 miles of the motorway
- Collecting ten cage van loads of large debris – including bumpers, tyres and ladders – and litter picking, filling over 800 black plastic bags
- 22 safety barrier repairs and all refuge areas cleaned and jetted

The new bridge is set to open in the summer. More information on the project is available at the [M6 junction 19 scheme page](#)

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.

The contribution of science and technology for levelling up across the UK

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Urging Syria's cooperation with the UN and OPCW

- UK underlines that unresolved issues in Syria's declaration of its chemical weapons programme are "of a serious and substantive nature"
- UK urges ongoing coordination between the UN and OPCW to collectively resolve the issue of Syria's chemical weapons programme

Transcript of statement by Ambassador Barbara Woodward at the Security Council briefing on Syria chemical weapons, 3 February 2021

We extend our thanks to High Representative Nakamitsu for her briefing today and I welcome the contributions from other members of the Council. As recognised by the Security Council in resolution 2118, ongoing coordination between the UN and the OPCW is vital if we are to collectively resolve this issue.

Despite decisions by this Council and that of the OPCW Executive Council of 27 September 2013, Syria's declaration of its chemical weapons programme can still not be considered accurate and complete. The unresolved issues are of a serious and substantive nature.

As the OPCW DG noted in his 25 January report, one of the 19 outstanding issues pertains to a chemical weapons production facility declared by the Syrian National Authority as never having been used for the production of chemical weapons. The review of all the information and other materials gathered by the Declaration Assessment Team since 2014, including samples, indicates that production and/or weaponisation of chemical warfare nerve agents did take place there.

The fact that four of the unresolved issues have been closed, shows that, contrary to the assertions of some that they are artificial, they can be resolved if Syria chooses to engage genuinely and constructively. Syria needs to provide complete access to documents and witnesses. The cat and mouse game of non-credible explanations and excuses cannot continue. The Technical Secretariat has repeatedly made clear that it stands ready to assist Syria in this regard. I note the DAT's intention to deploy for consultations again early this month. We expect Syria to provide a full response to all the queries during those meetings.

The ongoing threat posed to international peace and security by these unresolved issues is not hypothetical, especially to the thousands of Syrians who have suffered the horrifying effects on the body of nerve agents and chlorine since 2014.