

Universal Periodic Review 34th session: Minister for Human Rights statement

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a unique process, involving a peer review of the human rights records of all 193 UN member states. It is an important tool of the Human Rights Council aimed at sharing best practice. The UK strongly supports the UPR, having spoken at every session and about every country since the process began. This session saw the review of 14 countries, namely, [Angola](#), [Bolivia](#), [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [Egypt](#), [El Salvador](#), [Fiji](#), [The Gambia](#), [Iran](#), [Iraq](#), [Italy](#), [Kazakhstan](#), [Madagascar](#), [San Marino](#), and [Slovenia](#).

Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

The UK Government continued its approach to the third cycle of the UPR, using it as a tool to drive forward cooperation in the global fight against modern slavery, and making recommendations to every country undergoing review aimed at improving governmental responses to these crimes. Recommendations were wide-ranging and incorporated input from a number of anti-slavery NGOs, calling for improved support for victims, greater legislative proscription of these crimes, and engagement with businesses to tackle the risks of modern slavery in supply chains.

We continued to advocate for ratification of the Protocol of 2014 to the ILO Forced Labour Convention, as part of the 50 for Freedom campaign, which complements existing international instruments and provides specific guidance on measures for eliminating all forms of forced labour. We recognise that if the international community is going to make significant inroads into the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 8.7, and the eradication of forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking, we must urgently galvanise coordinated global action. We continue to push for implementation of the commitments contained in the Call to Action to End Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking, which was launched at the UN General Assembly in 2017 and has since received 90 endorsements.

Freedom of Religion or Belief

Freedom of religion or belief continues to be a priority for the United Kingdom, underlined by my appointment as the first Special Envoy for FoRB, and the subsequent appointment of Rehman Chishti to this role. We remain deeply concerned by the scale and severity of violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief around the world and have raised the issue in a number of reviews.

Although the UK already does a lot to stand up for the millions of people around the world who are denied the right to have and practise a religion, belief, or no belief at all, according to their conscience, we know there is

always more we can do. That is why, last year, we commissioned an independent Review into the support that the Foreign Office provides to persecuted Christians around the world. Work is already underway to implement its recommendations, which will not just support Christians, but members of other persecuted faith and belief communities too. I hope our Review encourages other Governments – even those where human rights are well established and upheld by the law – to explore what more they can do to support some of the most vulnerable people around the world.

UN Treaty Body elections

Since the 27th session of the UPR, we have made the recommendation to ‘adopt an open, merit-based selection process when selecting national candidates for UN Treaty Body elections’ to a considerable number of states. These expert bodies are a central part of the UN human rights system, charged with monitoring the implementation of human rights conventions in states which have signed up to them. The UK continues to advocate strengthening the quality, independence and diversity in Treaty Body membership.

Bolivia

On Bolivia, I recognise progress since their 2014 review and welcome their support to the Call of Action to End Human Trafficking, Modern Slavery and Forced Labour. I also note the new law passed in 2016, allowing transgender citizens to request having their name, gender and photo changed on official documents to reflect their identity. However, I am concerned by the substantial shortcomings in the conduct of the presidential and legislative elections in October this year and as such, the UK called on the Government to guarantee political rights in Bolivia. Furthermore, I urge the Government to increase efforts to investigate and prosecute perpetrators of human trafficking and provide adequate support for victims. Finally, I urge the Government to ensure anti-discrimination legislation is fully enforced.

Egypt

I welcome Egypt’s progress to address violence against women, including adopting a national strategy for women’s empowerment. I hope the NGO law will enable civil society organisations to operate more freely. However, I remain deeply concerned by restrictions on human rights defenders, including arrests, travel bans, asset freezes, and restrictions on freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association. I call on the Government to release those detained for exercising their right to freedom of expression, including all journalists, activists and human rights defenders, and unblock news and social media websites. I also call on Egypt to implement recommendations from the UN Committee Against Torture.

Iran

Turning to Iran, I appreciate their engagement with the UPR process. However, I remain deeply concerned by discrimination against persons belonging to minority religious groups, particularly the Baha’is and Christians. I am concerned by Iran’s failure to uphold international legal obligations, and

its arbitrary detention of citizens and dual nationals arrested on unclear charges, denied due process and subject to mistreatment. I call on Iran to demonstrate immediately that all detainees in prison are neither tortured nor subjected to cruel or inhumane treatment or punishment and call for Iran to ensure that trials are impartial and fair and that compassion may be shown so families may be reunited without further delay.

Iraq

On Iraq, I recognise the serious challenges that the country has faced since its 2014 review as it recovers from Daesh. I commend Government efforts to rehabilitate women survivors following Daesh atrocities, and welcome progress on the domestic violence bill. However, I am deeply concerned by the scale of violence from security forces in recent protests, and reports of media intimidation and suppression. Freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association must be protected. Furthermore, I call on the Government to reform their legislation to ensure justice and support for survivors of sexual violence and accountability of perpetrators.

I urge all countries under review during this session to give full and serious consideration to the UK recommendations. I encourage them not only to accept them, but also to implement all the recommendations in a timely and comprehensive manner. I look forward to the formal UPR adoption at the 43rd session of the UN Human Rights Council in March 2020.

Further Information