

Universal Periodic Review 35th 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 a unique 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. The session reviewed 14 States: [Armenia](#), [Grenada](#), [Guinea](#), [Guinea Bissau](#), [Guyana](#), [Kenya](#), [Kiribati](#), [Kuwait](#), [Kyrgyzstan](#), [the Lao People's Democratic Republic](#), [Lesotho](#), [Spain](#), [Sweden](#), and [Turkey](#).

Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

Throughout the 35th Session, the UK Government provided a recommendation relating to Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking to every government undergoing review. Recommendations were wide-ranging, calling for improved mechanisms to identify and support victims, the creation of robust legislation, and the consistent and effective prosecution of perpetrators. In support of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) 50 for Freedom Campaign, we also made recommendations for the ratification of the ILO Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, requiring governments to tackle forced labour in all its forms and provide protection to victims.

According to the Global Slavery Index, 40.3 million people across the world will be victims of modern slavery on any given day. It is a global problem that respects neither borders nor jurisdictions, and requires all states to act proactively to protect the most vulnerable in their societies. The UK Government continues to drive forward global action in the fight against modern slavery and human trafficking. In 2015, the UK passed world-leading legislation requiring businesses to report on how they are eradicating modern slavery from their supply chains, and this year, the Government will publish a modern slavery statement setting out the steps taken to prevent modern slavery in its own supply chains. The UK Government also announced in 2019 the appointment of Jennifer Townson as the Migration and Modern Slavery Envoy to advocate for tackling modern slavery globally, and enhance coordination with other nations committed to countering modern slavery and human trafficking.

Freedom of Religion or Belief

Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) 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 actively stands 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 to implement its recommendations, which will not just support Christians but members of other persecuted faith and belief communities too, is proceeding well, with ten of the 22 recommendations already implemented or in progress. 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 of Treaty Body membership.

Armenia

I recognise Armenia’s positive progress since its 2015 review, and the Government’s commitment to wide-ranging reforms, including Armenia’s conduct of elections in December 2018 and the advances in media freedom. However, I remain concerned about reported incidences of hate speech and attacks against LGBT individuals. I welcome Armenia’s legislative reforms towards gender equality and combatting violence against women and encourage the Government to adopt further measures to mainstream gender in all aspects of government reforms.

Grenada

Turning to Grenada, I welcome progress since its 2015 review, including ratification of a number of human rights treaties such as the Convention Against Torture. I also recognise that no executions have been carried out in Grenada for decades but encourage the Government to establish a formal moratorium on executions, with the aim to eventually abolish the death penalty.

Guinea

On Guinea, I welcome the Government’s engagement with the UPR and progress made in the country, particularly the abolition of the death penalty. However, I urge the Government to ensure the safety of journalists and human rights defenders, so they can exercise their rights to freedom of expression and association without fear of reprisals. I am also concerned by the high number of protestors and bystanders who have died during protests, including up to the 2013 parliamentary elections, and in recent months. For 2020, it is

crucial that elections are transparent, fair, timely and credible.

Guinea Bissau

I welcome Guinea Bissau's advances to promote and protect human rights and commend progress on implementing reforms in the judicial sector, including efforts to expand access to justice beyond Bissau. However, I am concerned that political instability in Guinea Bissau has delayed further progress, including implementation of human rights legislation and other measures to protect women, children, and vulnerable populations. I also urge the Government to take stronger action against corruption, and to ensure freedom of peaceful assembly is respected.

Guyana

On Guyana, I welcome progress since its last review and commend the Government's increased efforts to promote and protect media freedom. I encourage Guyana to join the Media Freedom Coalition in the coming year. I also welcome the removal of the mandatory death penalty for murder, but it is regrettable that death sentences continue to be imposed. I urge the Government to establish a formal moratorium on executions, with a view to eventual abolition.

Kenya

Turning to Kenya, I recognise the human rights progress in the country, particularly in education. I also commend Kenya's development of a more supportive environment for police reforms. However, I remain concerned by limited progress made to strengthen mechanisms to hold individual officers accountable for abuse of power. I urge the Government to empower and resource the Independent Police Oversight Authority, Internal Affairs Unit, and Director of Public Prosecutions to investigate fully and prosecute cases of police abuse.

Kiribati

I recognise Kiribati's progress since its 2015 review efforts to prevent gender-based violence. I recommend the implementation of the Family Welfare Act 2013 and the National Approach to Eliminating Sexual and Gender Based Violence Action Plan to improve access to essential services for violence survivors, embed measures to change social norms, and facilitate redress of such crimes. I welcome Kiribati's work on scoping a National Human Rights Institution via the South Pacific Community's Pacific Commonwealth Equalities Programme. I urge the Government to establish a National Human Rights Institution, in line with the Paris Principles, using expertise from regional and UN bodies as necessary.

Kuwait

On Kuwait, I recognise the progress on human rights and the improvements to domestic worker conditions, but remain concerned by the reports of confiscation of passports, debt bondage, and the continued use of the kafala

sponsorship system. I welcome Kuwait's progress to improve rights for stateless persons, but am concerned that access to essential services is often restricted. I urge Kuwait to naturalise stateless persons eligible for Kuwaiti nationality, and regularise the status of the remainder. I also urge Kuwait to protect the right to freedom of expression for all, including speech online.

Kyrgyzstan

I welcome steps taken by the Kyrgyz Republic to promote and protect human rights, such as improvement to legislation on gender-based violence and on child, early and forced marriage. However, I urge the Government to improve implementation of this legislation, by increasing the number of cases taken to court. In this parliamentary election year, a free press is essential for ensuring democratic accountability. I urge the Government to protect freedom of the media by adopting legislation requiring sentences to be proportionate to the offence, and by decriminalising defamation.

The Lao People's Democratic Republic

I recognise progress in the Lao People's Democratic Republic, including on education and healthcare. I welcome increasing infrastructure and development in Laos, but remain concerned about projects resulting in forced land appropriation. I am also concerned about restrictions on freedom of expression and foreign news agencies. I urge the Government to promote and protect freedom of expression for all.

Lesotho

Turning to Lesotho, I welcome the ongoing National Reform process and the recent collaboration between the Government and civil society organisations on the reforms and the process to establish a Human Rights Commission. However, I remain seriously concerned that torture and police brutality continue to be reported, yet perpetrators are rarely prosecuted, and I urge the Government to address the lengthy delays in the judicial system and politicisation of judicial appointments.

Spain

I welcome Spain's strong commitment to promoting and protecting human rights. We commend Spain for supporting the UN's human rights work around the world. I encourage Spain to ensure that administrations work together to ensure that asylum seekers/refugees have sufficient access to social protection and services and their claims are processed efficiently.

Sweden

On Sweden, I welcome their long-standing commitment to promoting and protecting human rights. I commend Sweden's extensive contribution to human rights domestically and internationally, commitment to advancing women's and girls' rights, and efforts to ensure media freedom. I encourage Sweden to maintain efforts to combat discrimination and hate crimes against minority

groups, and welcome its adoption of a national plan to combat racism and hate crime.

Turkey

Turning to Turkey, the UK appreciates the challenges that Turkey has faced since the 2016 failed coup. We note that the end of the state of emergency following the attempted coup, and real progress against Daesh and the PKK, provide an opportunity for reform ahead of the 2023 elections. However, I am concerned by the harassment and imprisonment of journalists and human rights defenders. The UK trusts the Government will remove obstacles to freedom of expression for all, and we urge the Government to decriminalise defamation.

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 44th session of the UN Human Rights Council in June 2020.

Further information