Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Baroness Anelay addresses Human Rights Council in Geneva

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Baroness Anelay said:

Mr President, High Commissioner, Excellencies, it is an honour to address the Human Rights Council today.

In our first twelve months back on the Council, we have been reminded once again of the challenges that are confronting us.

The persecution of minorities around the world; the rise of ISIL and its abhorrent ideology of violent extremism; and Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, and destabilisation of east Ukraine.

As the UN's voice on human rights, it is our collective responsibility to strengthen the global promotion and protection of human rights. We must address violations and abuses wherever they occur.

This is by no means a simple task. However, we know that - when we're united - we can confront even the most entrenched challenges.

Fifteen years on from UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the international community has demonstrated its commitment to tackling violence against women and girls; to putting them at the heart of peace processes; and to ending, once and for all, the use of rape as a weapon of war.

The positive global response to the challenge of sexual violence in conflict has shown that intractable challenges can be taken on. I want to use my address today to talk about another similarly global problem: slavery in the twenty first century.

Modern slavery is a brutal crime. It knows no boundaries, and it does not discriminate on gender, age, creed, culture or race. It is impossible to know the true scale of modern slavery, though the United Nations estimates that 21 million people are trapped in slavery today, representing a sickeningly global industry worth more $150 billion a year. It is a hidden crime. Most victims suffer in silence.

Traffickers exploit whatever means they have to coerce, compel and deceive individuals into a life of oppression, servitude and abuse.

From bonded construction workers to young girls trafficked into prostitution; from child garment workers to unpaid domestic servants working all hours of the day and night. Slavery is a global issue, from which no country is immune.

If we are to be credible as members of the Human Rights Council, we must address issues of concern in our own countries. In the spirit of the Universal Periodic Review, I want to set out what we in the UK are doing to address the problem of slavery within our own borders.

We have introduced a Modern Slavery Bill - the first of its kind in Europe - to send a strong message, both domestically and internationally. We are determined to put to an end this abhorrent practice.

The Bill increases sentences for slave drivers and includes measures that will mean that more traffickers are brought to justice. It will also create an important new role - an Anti-Slavery Commissioner - to galvanise our response to these terrible crimes. The Commissioner will also have a strong focus on working with the international community.

No issue that comes before this Council, however, can be tackled by one country alone. Today I urge all of you to join us in taking up the fight against the heinous practice of modern slavery around the world.

This year we can shine a spotlight on abuses and - through cooperation to tackle trafficking networks across our borders - hold those who are responsible to account.

I now want to speak about Syria and Libya. It is the Council’s duty to stand up for those suffering through instability, crises, violent extremism or totalitarian regimes.

Syria continues to represent the world’s most serious humanitarian and security crisis. Appalling violations and abuses of human rights are committed daily. The Assad regime’s indiscriminate attacks on civilians continue unabated.

The regime continues to pursue its heinous agenda by stoking ethnic tensions. I am appalled by the reports of deliberate targeting of minorities - including Muslims and Christians alike - by ISIL and other extremist groups.

The UN Commission of Inquiry has played an essential role to catalogue and highlight the evidence of the terrible human rights situation, the perpetration of war crimes and the use of chemical weapons.

Here in the Human Rights Council, we must agree a resolution to extend the mandate of the Commission of Inquiry and enables this essential scrutiny to continue.

We must show the Syrian people that they have not been forgotten.

The political and security crisis in Libya in the last year has caused a serious deterioration in human rights.

Civil society, the judiciary and human rights defenders have been intimidated and killed. Many have had to leave their homes, including the displaced Tawerghan people.

The Office of the High Commissioner's report on developments in Libya in 2014 describes the deliberate targeting of religious minorities.

Fighting in Libya has allowed extremists including ISIL to gain a foothold. We were all shocked and appalled by the massacre of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians last month.

It is imperative that the fighting ends now, and that all parties commit to the political process led by the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General to end the suffering of the Libyan people.

The UK remains deeply concerned too about human rights abuses elsewhere: in North Korea, Iran, and Burma the human rights of individuals continue to be trampled down.

In Ukraine we call on parties to implement fully their commitments under the Minsk process, starting with full adherence to the ceasefire, in order to reach a peaceful solution to the crisis. They must ensure full respect for human rights and international humanitarian law, and provide free and non-discriminatory access to humanitarian actors.

I would like to use this opportunity to thank the High Commissioner for Human Rights for the outstanding leadership he has shown in tackling these and other crises since he has taken up office.

We supported his recommendation that the Council defer discussions on Sri Lanka and consideration of his Office's report. We agree with the High Commissioner that the report should be published no later than September.

We hope and trust that the government of Sri Lanka will act on the commitments it has made to reconciliation, accountability and human rights and will work with the office of the High Commissioner and the international community in doing just that.

Mr President, many of the issues we address here are not new.

In the 800th anniversary year of Magna Carta, we recall that Eleanor Roosevelt said that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights "may well become the international Magna Carta."

Inspired by both of those documents, we remember our commitment to work together. The opportunity for constructive and frank discussions is what makes this Council so valuable to

us all. Over the coming weeks, let us live up to our duty. Let us give voice to those who are unheard, and let us expose those who oppress them.

Thank you, Mr President.

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