Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Human Rights and Democracy Report launch

2013-04-15

Speaking at the launch in London today the Foreign Secretary William Hague said:

Good morning ladies and gentlemen and welcome to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for the launch of our

report on human rights and democracy for 2012

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This is a very important part of our work in the Foreign Office. And I am delighted to be welcoming two speakers today, Ahmed Shaheed, Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur on Iran and Madeleine Rees from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and member of the PSVI Steering Board.

This report reflects twelve months of intense lobbying, campaigning and negotiating by Foreign Office staff and ministers, it documents our action to raise standards and stamp out abuses wherever and whenever they occur. And whether it is seeking a moratorium on the death penalty, or ending what is happening in Syria, or rallying the international community to destroy the culture of impunity that surrounds sexual violence in conflict, the promotion of human rights is at the forefront of the work of the FCO and of my own objectives as Foreign Secretary.

The reason for that intense focus is simple: this country is built on the belief that citizens have certain inalienable rights and that respect for those rights is the basis of a just, free and stable society. That is why we promote greater political and economic freedom across the world, it is why we hold tyrannical and repressive regimes to account, and it is why we make every possible effort to ensure that we live up to our own values and obligations.

The rights that we promote are universal, and not an attempt to spread western political culture. When the drafting committee for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights first met in 1947, there was a conviction among the parties that the Declaration should not reflect Western values alone. So when that Declaration states that "everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person" and that "no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile", it is reinforcing principles that extend to all nations and not just the democracies of Europe and North America.

Since the Declaration was adopted, the world has been transformed: Empires have crumbled, new nations have been built, and the internet is bringing us all closer together. But the values of the Declaration have remained the basis for legitimate, representative and open government around the globe. Our 2012 Human Rights and Democracy Report is a comprehensive record of the UK's efforts during the year to promote and uphold those values, and to identify where we can and should do more.

This country and the international community have a duty to respond to extreme humanitarian distress, but we also have to address the underlying causes of that distress. That can't be done overnight, as the struggle to abolish the slave trade, improve women's rights, or conclude an international arms trade treaty so clearly demonstrate. And today I want to emphasise how we, the UK, are not only responding effectively to immediate human rights abuses, but are also fighting to eradicate those abuses in the future.

Nothing demonstrates more the need for a decisive international humanitarian response than the appalling disaster that is unfolding in Syria today. More than 100 people are estimated to be dying each day and the total death toll is now over 70,000. There is widespread evidence of grave violations including massacres, torture, summary executions and the systematic use of rape by the regime's forces and its militias.

These are intolerable crimes committed by the regime against its own civilians, and let there be no doubt that those responsible will be brought to justice. To help ensure that sufficient evidence is gathered for successful prosecutions, the UK has trained more than 300 Syrian activists and journalists to document human rights abuses.

We've also contributed nearly £140 million in humanitarian aid since the crisis began, which has funded food, clean drinking water, medical assistance, blankets and shelter for tens of thousands of people. And we are supporting the Syrian National Coalition's own efforts to deliver aid.

This assistance is absolutely necessary, as we have an obligation to support the genuine moderate and democratic forces in Syria who are in dire need of help. Otherwise, we risk abandoning the Syrian people to the poisonous influence of extremism or the tyranny of Assad.

We must also continue to deal effectively with the immediate reverberations from the Arab Spring, supporting those countries that are in transition to freer and more open societies. The people of the Middle East are showing incredible courage as they battle for democracy and individual liberty. Their determination for change has brought the first ever truly democratic presidential elections in Egypt, a new democratic government in Tunisia, a new and more open constitution in Morocco, and steps towards political reform in Jordan.

But the deterioration in law and order in Egypt, as well as the economic problems that all of the post-revolution countries are facing, remind us that it takes time to build the foundations of strong institutions, responsible and accountable government, a free press, and equal rights for men and women. To ensure that democracy is firmly entrenched in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, we have to be solid in our support and adaptable to the challenges that lie ahead.

Although Britain will always be decisive in her support for democracy in the Middle East and ending humanitarian abuses in Syria, we also need the hope, vision and determination to tackle the conditions that allow these human rights abuses to take place. On this, the UK is playing a central role in two areas in particular: the fight to end the use of sexual violence in conflict, and the need to regulate trade in conventional arms.

First, we are seeking to rally sustained and coordinated international action to eradicate the use of sexual violence in conflict and to shatter the culture of impunity that surrounds these crimes.

Last week at the G8 Foreign Ministers meeting, some of the most powerful countries in the world adopted an historic declaration that rape and serious sexual violence constitute grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions and agreed to work together towards the goal of ending sexual violence in conflict. We also made a number of concrete commitments that included endorsing a new international protocol on the investigation and documentation of sexual violence in conflict, agreeing to put a comprehensive response to sexual violence into every post-conflict humanitarian and development effort, and providing additional long-term funding and support to victims.

These measures will improve evidence gathering and lead to more prosecutions, empower survivors to come forward, and ensure that victims receive the long-term support they need to rebuild their lives with dignity.

But this effort does not begin and end with our presidency of the G8. Instead, we will use the G8's support as a foundation to build a strong international coalition against wartime rape and sexual violence in conflict at the UN and more widely, so that the momentum we have built becomes irreversible.

Second, over the last seven years we have joined in leading efforts at the UN to adopt an international Arms Trade Treaty to regulate the transfer of conventional arms. This month that treaty was adopted by the UN General Assembly, which represents a huge landmark in the history of human rights. The treaty will save lives, reduce human suffering, and promote development. We are proud of the role that Britain played in securing this treaty and we must ensure that it comes into force as soon as possible.

So on these two issues, which have consistently fed the cycle of international conflict, the UK has been instrumental in shifting the debate and promoting coordinated action. But global

problems can't be solved by one country alone, of course, they require a collective effort. It is vital that we work through international organisations such as the UN Human Rights Council and the International Criminal Court, drawing on their expertise, collaborating with partners, and strengthening these international institutions in the process. We are committed to making them as effective as possible, which is why we are seeking election to the Human Rights Council in November for a two year term.

We must also remember that despite the best effort of governments, it is the heroism and determination of demonstrators in Cairo, journalists in Moscow, and bloggers in Aleppo that ultimately bring freedom, openness and sustainable democracy to their societies. We all owe them a great debt. It is through their bravery to speak and write the truth that we know when leaders are ignoring the rights of their citizens. And it is through the compassion, dedication and commitment of human rights activists, some of whom are in this room today, that we can hold certain regimes to account for their actions.

The 2012 Human Rights Report highlights several 'Countries of Concern' and this year we've reviewed the criteria for their selection so that in addition to the gravity of the human rights situation in the country, and the potential impact on the wider region, we also consider the level of UK engagement and our ability to actually make a difference. As a result, we have retained 27 countries of concern, dropping only Chad from last year's report. And our case studies will again be subject to monitoring and reporting during the course of the year so that we can shine a light on particular countries if needed.

I want to thank my Advisory Group on Human Rights for their advice in reviewing the criteria for selecting the countries of concern. I also want to thank them for the significant contribution they are making to the development of our policies on human rights.

Our ministerial team, especially Baroness Warsi who is here today, and our staff in London and overseas, will continue to lobby, influence and campaign to implement these policies at all times. There will be huge challenges ahead, as we seek to end the violence and suffering in Syria, and deal effectively with the unforeseen events that will test us over the coming year.

But we must also remember that the vision of a world where every government upholds the Universal Declaration of Human Rights will never be achieved through the deployment of peacekeepers or the distribution of food, water and medicine alone -although these things remain absolutely vital.

We must deal effectively with the reasons why such response becomes so necessary, and in 2012 that is exactly what we did and what we will continue to do in 2013 and beyond. I hope you will welcome this report and shortly I look forward to your questions shortly. I will now ask Ahmed Shaheed, Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur on Iran, to speak to us.

Further Information

Read the

2012 Human Rights report

Read previous years

FCO Human Rights reports

The Foreign Secretary delivered a

written ministerial statement to Parliament on the report

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/2012-annual-human-rights-and-democracy-report