Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Baroness Anelay closing statement on the 33rd Human Rights Council

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The UN Human Rights Council concluded its 33rd Session today, passing a range of important resolutions on Syria, Burundi, Sudan, Somalia, DRC, Yemen, Contemporary Slavery, as well as confirming the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Independent Expert mandate holder.

It was a great privilege to attend the opening of the 33rd session of the Human Rights Council, where I participated in important discussions on contemporary slavery, migration, and preventing sexual violence. I welcome the progress made at this session and Council members' commitment to hold to account those responsible for the most abhorrent violations and abuses of human rights, as well as their support for reform in many other countries.

I remain deeply concerned about the plight of civilians in Syria subjected to abuses and violations perpetrated by Daesh and the regime. The Asad regime and its supporters, including Russia, must end their indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas and infrastructure. The UK supports the UN Special Envoy's demand for a Cessation of Hostilities and efforts to enable a return to peace negotiations. I particularly welcome this Council's commitment to hold a High Level Panel focused on arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances. This will help cast a spotlight on the illegal detention and possible disappearance of tens of thousands of persons by the Syrian regime. Those responsible must be held to account.

I remain disturbed by the allegations of horrific human rights violations in the recent report of the UN Independent Investigation on Burundi. I urge the Government of Burundi to take practical steps to reassure the international community that it is ready to act in the best interests of all the people of Burundi. The UK strongly supports the new Commission of Inquiry mechanism which will ensure that the allegations are promptly and fully investigated, and that those responsible are held to account. In light of the gravity of the documented violations, it is imperative that the attention of the international community does not falter. Swift implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2303 is vital, and as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the UK stands ready to consider other measures to end human rights violations.

I am pleased that the Council has renewed the mandate of the Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Sudan. I encourage the Government of Sudan to implement the

recommendations of his report and continue to allow access to the Independent Expert. The UK remains concerned about restrictions on civil society and freedom of religion or belief. I urge the Government of Sudan to ensure that those who have committed human rights violations are held to account. I welcome the signing of the African Union's roadmap by both the Government of Sudan and opposition. Reaching an agreement will be essential for ensuring that civilians receive humanitarian assistance, and that a lasting ceasefire holds.

The UK has once again played a leading role in delivering a strong, constructive resolution on Somalia, which highlights the importance of human rights and renews the mandate of the UN Independent Expert. In this electoral period, it is essential that there is a peaceful and transparent process that respects freedoms of expression and the media, association and assembly, and upholds commitments on the inclusion of women. I regret the recent announcement of a further delay to the electoral process. A credible and timely electoral process will be a crucial signal of Somalia's continued positive trajectory and will be fundamental for the country's progress towards democracy and stability.

I am alarmed by the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and thank the Joint Human Rights Office in the DRC for their excellent work. I am particularly concerned by the disproportionate response from the security forces on 19 September. I urge the Government of the DRC to respect human rights, including those of freedom of expression and assembly, and call for peaceful responses to protest. I call on all sides to desist from violence. Those bearing personal responsibility for repressive actions should know that there will be international consequences.

The human rights situation in Yemen - including the continued use of child soldiers - remains of deep concern. The conflict has further impeded the capacity of the legitimate Yemeni authority and civil society to protect human rights. I am concerned about attacks on protesters and journalists, and arbitrary detentions. We continue to raise with the Government of Yemen, the Houthis and the Coalition the importance of respect for human rights law. I hope the adoption of the resolution on Yemen, by the consensus of the Council, will help the situation on the ground.

The Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery's latest report provides a list of actions for States to take to prevent this heinous crime and protect victims. I am delighted that her mandate was renewed during this session. Combating modern slavery is a key priority for the UK Government and, as the Prime Minister said during her speech to the UN General Assembly, slavery is "one of the worst human rights abuses of our time". That is why we have pledged £33.5m Official Development Assistance to prevent slavery in source countries where victims are regularly trafficked to the UK. The Human Rights Council has an important role to play in the international response to eradicate this vile crime.

I am delighted that the Council has upheld the President’s selection of candidate for the UN’s first Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The appointment of an Independent Expert will ensure that the Council remains seized of the violence and discrimination that takes place on the basis of a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity. The UK firmly believes that the chance to live a life with dignity, free from discrimination, should not be based on a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity. We welcome the appointment of Mr Vitit Muntarbhorn to this important role, and offer his work our full commitment and support.

The Human Rights Council has yet again demonstrated why we must work together to uphold universal rights. For the UK, membership of the Council is a privilege and comes with a responsibility to act, to acknowledge what has happened in the past, to address the worst crises of our time, and to strengthen protections for the future. We are standing for re-election to the Council for the period 2017 – 2019 so that we can continue this vital work.

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