Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary launches Human Rights and Democracy report

2012-04-30

Good morning ladies and gentlemen and welcome to Lancaster House for the launch of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office report on human rights and democracy for 2011.

This report represents twelve months of the Foreign Office's lobbying of other governments; of our diplomats speaking up for political detainees, visiting prisons, attending the trials of human rights defenders and supporting human rights activists and campaigners across the world on issues ranging from women's rights to disability rights and the abolition of the death penalty; and of Ministers raising cases of concern with governments around the world.

Thousands of hours of work go into this report, and I am very grateful to every member of the Foreign Office who has been involved here in London and overseas.

Indeed our country is one of the most active in the world when it comes to promoting human rights, and this report is one of the most comprehensive that is produced by any Foreign Ministry in the world. We are proud of this record and of the stand we take on behalf of those whose rights are denied around the world, and I am proud to present this report to you today. It is an essential means by which we attempt to improve human rights in the nearly thirty nations that it covers.

Our efforts to promote human rights as a Government benefit greatly from strong bipartisan support across British politics and from the work of the various excellent Parliamentary Committees; and I am also personally very grateful to the members of my own Human Rights Advisory Group.

I particularly welcome Kate Allen of Amnesty International, indeed one of the members of that group and to Heba Morayef from Human Rights Watch as our other speakers today.

As they know, the struggle for human rights is continuous.

It is a story of long campaigns and hard-victories against conflict and poverty, against prejudice and ignorance, and against crime, injustice and repression.

It is a sobering fact that I speak today against the backdrop of continued violence and inhumanity being committed against the people of Syria by a regime determined to cling to

power and convinced it can do so by crushing opposition. It is utterly mistaken in that view and I am convinced that the Assad regime is doomed over the longer term.

We have not yet succeeded in stemming the violence and securing the political transition that the people of Syria need, and the Syrian regime continues to fail fully to implement the ceasefire agreement and two UN Security Council Resolutions. If this continues we will need to discuss what steps to take to respond to this unacceptable situation, and in the meantime we will step up efforts to deploy a full team of UN monitors on the ground. We call again on all parties in Syria to adhere to the Annan plan.

But despite this, in my view 2011 will stand out as a positive year for human rights and democracy.

It will stand out because of the remarkable power of the courage of the people of Syria and of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, whose actions have shone an intense spotlight on the need for greater political and economic freedom across the Middle East and North Africa.

They helped to spur positive reform in countries such as Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Yemen and to a certain extent in Bahrain, by showing that Governments must address legitimate aspirations for economic development and political participation to build stability over the long term. This is the message that we echo in our discussions with all countries in the region, without a single exception.

And they sent a chill down the spine of undemocratic regimes far beyond the Middle East, by showing that human rights cannot be indefinitely suppressed anywhere.

2011 will also be remembered for the successful NATO intervention to save lives in Libya, when we worked in an unprecedented way with a broad coalition of states from the region.

And it will be remembered because it saw the beginning of what we hope will be Burma’s irrevocable transformation.

Being able to meet Aung San Suu Kyi in her own home as I did, and to do so just weeks before she became a Member of Parliament - both of which are things that were completely unthinkable even a year ago - was a moment of great hope and optimism.

This country stood by Aung San Suu Kyi and her people for so long and we did not do so in vain. Over the last six months our government has led the way in urging the Burmese authorities to take vital steps to release prisoners and stage free and fair elections. And now that they have done those things we are also leading the way in suspending sanctions, lifting our policy of discouraging trade with Burma and supporting responsible investment.

For all these reasons 2011 was a year in which the cause of democracy and freedom was reignited in many places, more than any other I can remember since the fall of the Berlin

Wall.

I pay tribute to the years of campaigning by brave human rights activists, journalists, lawyers, human rights defenders and NGOs which contributed to these changes; from the political prisoners of Burma to the people in Syria today who are taking their lives into their hands to smuggle food and medical supplies across check points to the activists who so desperately need it.

But at the same time as welcoming these positive changes, we must recognise the scale of the challenge which still lies ahead.

The real test of the success of the revolutions in the Middle East or the change in Burma will be what happens in court rooms, in parliaments, in police stations, in schools and at the ballot box in those countries in the coming months: those will be the moments when we see whether human rights and democratic principles are being respected or not.

Already there are human rights concerns, whether it is over the treatment of detainees in Libya or the situation of religious minorities in Egypt.

The huge economic and political uncertainties which these countries face, and the fact that it takes time to change the foundations of a society, or to entrench the rule of law and democratic institutions, mean that there will be setbacks as well as advances in the months ahead.

But we should not become pessimistic or fatalistic, or slip back into old ways of thinking about the Middle East in particular. We must continue patient, determined, long term support to civil society in the Arab world as we are through our Arab Partnership Initiative which is supporting projects in 11 countries. And we must use our active role in the European Union and G8 to support genuine reform, while recognising that we cannot dictate to these countries.

It is also a time to remember all those countries where we have not seen an improvement in human rights over the last year or the situation has actually deteriorated such as in Belarus, North Korea, Eritrea and Somalia.

All these countries are covered in our report and will continue to be a major focus of our efforts.

For human rights is an indivisible part of our Government’s foreign policy, running throughout all our diplomacy:

from our support for international institutions of justice, whose importance have been re-confirmed by the conclusion of the trial of Charles Taylor last week to our active diplomacy on an International Arms Trade Treaty;

from our insistence on human rights clauses in EU Free Trade Agreements to our work in the United Nations;

and from our relations with our closest allies to the smallest of our Overseas Territories.

Our approach also includes constantly striving to live up to our values and to address where we fall short.

This applies to our efforts to address past allegations of British complicity in extraordinary rendition leading to torture, and our scrupulous and rigorous work to review UK Defence Exports Policy in the light of the Arab Spring.

All the Foreign Office's work in these areas is covered in the report before you; work that we are not only determined to continue but to strengthen where we can.

One measure that we are introducing this year which I believe will strengthen our work is a new mechanism to make it possible for us to increase attention on countries that experience a rapid change in their overall human rights situation during the course of a year.

This is a change from the past, in which the Foreign Office decided at the beginning of each year which countries were of concern.

Now, we will make quarterly decisions on whether systematic reporting on human rights development in other countries in required. We are applying this immediately in the case of Ethiopia and Bahrain, which are covered in this report as case studies, and we will review Rwanda and Egypt for inclusion at the mid-year point.

The Foreign Office has a dedicated 5 million pound human rights and democracy programme for the coming year, spent across the six thematic areas of torture prevention, the death penalty, women's rights, freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression online and business and human rights.

This morning I have announced to parliament that I have decided to allocate an additional £1.5 million in funding this year to support our human rights work. This represents a 30% increase in funding, and it will be devoted to projects to promote freedom of expression online and the implementation of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, with a particular emphasis on the 28 countries covered in this report.

I am confident that these measures will enable us to improve our work further as we look ahead to 2012 with the many challenges it undoubtedly holds, but also the many opportunities to extend and promote a more equitable, stable and prosperous world. In that spirit I hope you will welcome this report, and I look forward to taking your questions.

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