Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative: UK team of experts

2013-01-30

Speaking at a reception for the team of experts at the Foreign Office today the Foreign Secretary William Hague said:

“Good evening and welcome to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Eight months ago I announced the start of a new UK campaign to prevent the use of rape and other forms of sexual violence as a weapon of war.

The sad truth today is that the perpetrators of these appalling, life-shattering crimes still tend to go unpunished.

Many hundreds of thousands of survivors live with the stigma, shame and burden, in many countries around the world. And their ranks are being added to all the time, including in Syria, where the number of refugees who have reported being raped is truly shocking.

We have set ourselves a very practical goal in the United Kingdom: we want to use our diplomatic influence and resources to increase the number of perpetrators of sexual violence who are brought to justice, and to build up the legal and practical capability of other countries to tackle these crimes themselves.

This is a moral issue, because the individuals concerned have a right to justice and support, and because we must shift the stigma from the survivors of rape to the perpetrators. But it is also central to foreign policy, because sexual violence perpetuates division and conflict, undermining international peace and security.

We are determined to help shatter the culture of impunity for wartime rape, and to rally the world to do more to help survivors. We must overturn the age-old assumptions that rape is somehow an inevitable by-product of conflict; and confront its use in the same way that we have confronted slavery and are urgently seeking an International Arms Trade Treaty.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is leading this new campaign, and we now have the first dedicated team of diplomats working full time here in the FCO on preventing sexual violence in conflict.

But this Initiative is part of our Government’s wider commitment to human rights. So I am also very grateful for the support of the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for International

Development, the Defence Secretary, and the Government's Champion for Tacking Violence Against Women Overseas Lynne Featherstone.

At the heart of our campaign is the new UK Team of Experts which we can deploy to conflict-affected countries, gathered here in the Foreign Office tonight for the very first time.

The team draws on the skills of doctors, lawyers, police officers, psychologists and forensic scientists among others.

These are all people with the skills to assist with investigations and prosecutions; to help with the care of victims and witnesses; and to train local authorities.

I promised that we would set up this team by the end of 2012. And so we have: we have now recruited 73 experts, 50 of whom are here this evening.

How we deploy the Team of Experts will depend on needs in the country concerned. However each deployment will usually fall into one of three categories: it will either support a UN mission; assist an NGO working on the ground; or be deployed at the request of the national authorities of that country.

We have already deployed part of the Team to Syria's borders, to train local health professionals in how to respond to reports of sexual violence. We will expand this work this year, deploying a team again, in larger numbers, to help Syrian refugees and those working with them.

We will also deploy the Team of Experts to at least four other countries this year:

To Libya, to support survivors of sexual violence committed during the revolution; to South Sudan, to work with the UN and Government to strengthen local justice; to Eastern DRC to help doctors and lawyers investigate the cases of the hundreds of women and girls who are raped there each month; and to Bosnia-Herzegovina where thousands of women are still waiting for justice 20 years since the war. There, our experts will help local courts and prosecutors to address the backlog of war crimes cases and protect survivors and witnesses.

Responding to sexual violence needs to be built into every aspect of conflict prevention and peace-building work overseas, from development to peace-keeping.

So I can also announce today that we have offered members of the UK Team of Experts to the EU military training mission to Mali, to provide human rights training to the Malian armed forces on preventing and responding to sexual violence. This will be designed to enable them to better protect civilians and to act responsibly, particularly towards women. Providing support directly to the Malian forces is essential. Despite the cooperation of other African nations and the international community, addressing instability, and demonstrating respect for

the rights of civilians by addressing these crimes, is ultimately the responsibility of the Malian Authorities.

We will work closely with DFID, the MoD, international NGOs and the Office of the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict over the coming months, to identify additional countries where the deployment of our team of experts can add value to existing efforts, or fill specific gaps.

On behalf of the whole British government, I want to thank all those who have joined the Team of Experts, and all the countries which have responded enthusiastically to our Initiative.

One of our aims is also to encourage greater coordination between countries working in this area. That includes working closely with partners such as Australia, the US, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark to identify opportunities for joint deployments. I am delighted that representatives from those countries are able to be here this evening.

I also pay tribute to the UN Secretary General's Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict Zainab Bangura. Because we are determined to support the UN's efforts, we have provided £1 million in funding to her office, which will help bolster efforts to build local capacity, facilitate legal reform, and secure political support for national governments.

The Team of Experts represents a distinctive British contribution to the fight against sexual violence in conflict.

But we want the international community as a whole to do much more. So we aim to use the UK's G8 Presidency this year to secure a clear statement of intent from some of the world's most powerful nations to make real, tangible progress on this issue.

When I host the G8 Foreign Ministers in April here in London I will be asking for practical contributions of resources and capabilities, and support for a new International Protocol on the investigation and documentation of sexual violence in conflict. This is my personal priority during the G8.

And after the G8 Foreign Ministers meeting, we will take this cause to the UN, including to the UN Security Council in June when we hold the Presidency, and to the UN General Assembly in September when we will hope to increase support for the International Protocol.

Ministers and our Embassies in every corner of the globe are already lobbying other governments and organisations such as the OSCE, NATO, EU and African Union on this.

I am very grateful to NGOs such as Amnesty, Save the Children, and Care International who have helped us to develop this plan of action, and to the many other organisations whose groundbreaking work we are all indebted to, and which the British Government wants to champion and build on.

So we are putting the weight and resources of the United Kingdom into efforts to prevent sexual violence in war in an unprecedented way. You, our new Team of Experts and staff in the Foreign Office, are all a vital part of that, and I thank you for your support and involvement, and I will be supporting your work every step of the way. “

Further Information

Read the Foreign Secretary’s blog:

Sexual Violence in War Is Our Generation’s Slave Trade

The Foreign Secretary talked about the

UK’s initiative to help tackle sexual violence in conflict with media

Wilton Park conference on

preventing sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations

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