Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Lord Ahmad marks 70th anniversary of UN Human Rights Declaration

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2018 is the 70th anniversary of the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

but this is not a moment for idle nostalgia. It is our opportunity to reaffirm the Declaration's enduring relevance. An opportunity to redouble our collective efforts to uphold the rights of individuals; to nurture the creativity and human progress which flow from these rights; and to promote the openness and tolerance that allow societies to flourish. We must do this now more than ever because all around the world these rights are under threat.

Syria

In Syria, nearly 7 years since the conflict began, human rights and international humanitarian law are being flouted daily, with apparent impunity. Across the country, thousands of detainees are suffering inhuman conditions and torture. Chemical weapons have been used. Pro-regime forces bomb hospitals and schools, and use starvation sieges to force surrender. Eastern Ghouta, where hundreds have been killed in the past week by pro-regime bombing, is hell on earth. We are appalled by reports that pro-regime airstrikes continue in spite of the UN Security Council Resolution calling for a humanitarian pause. Those with influence over the regime must act now to ensure the ceasefire is implemented in full. We must bring this conflict to an end.

The UK commends the work of the UN Commission of Inquiry in investigating and highlighting abuses and violations and we urge members to support the renewal of its mandate. We are pleased that the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism has begun to identify and build cases against those responsible. The international community must speak up for those who have no voice. We are particularly concerned about the plight of Syrian children. The High Level Panel on the Violations of the Rights of Children should allow us to discuss what more can be done to protect them.

Myanmar

Turning to Myanmar: earlier this month our Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, saw first-hand the devastating impact of the crisis on Rohingya refugees. Ethnic tensions were a significant

factor behind the appalling violence in Rakhine state last summer, and we remain deeply concerned by the persecution faced by Rohingya Muslims, Christian and other minorities in Myanmar.

The UK is clear that the despicable atrocities carried out against the Rohingya were ethnic cleansing. In the absence of a credible and transparent judicial process in Myanmar, the UK will continue to explore with international partners how to bring to justice those responsible for these appalling crimes. The UK supports the work of the Fact Finding Mission and the Special Rapporteur, Ms Yanghee Lee, and calls for the renewal of her mandate.

It is right that we should focus on ensuring that refugees can return voluntarily in safety, dignity and with international oversight. However, we must also work for the longer term. That means supporting Myanmar's democratic transition, and the promotion of freedom, tolerance and diversity, to build a lasting peace.

North Korea

Likewise in North Korea, the international community has rightly focused on exerting pressure on the regime to give up its illegal nuclear and ballistic missile programmes. However, we must not overlook its appalling human rights situation.

North Korea's Constitution speaks of freedom but in reality that freedom is a mirage. In the 2017 ranking of press freedom by Reporters Without Borders, North Korea came last. If North Koreans express religious beliefs they face harsh punishment or even death.

The 2014 UN Commission of Inquiry estimated that there were between 80,000 and 120,000 political prisoners in North Korea. The 2016 Global Slavery Index estimates more than a million North Koreans are enslaved. We urge all UN Members to enact UN Security Council Resolutions regarding North Korean overseas workers, and to avoid returning defectors to North Korea in such circumstances.

The UK urges North Korea to end its illegal nuclear weapons programme; to cooperate with the international community; and to allow human rights actors unhindered access. There is a very different path open to the regime. One that offers security and prosperity and the genuine chance of a better life for every citizen.

Iran

In Iran, while we welcome the passage of the new anti-narcotics law, there remain other issues of real concern, including the reports of torture and deaths in custody during recent protests; the increase in religious persecution in particular against the Baha'i and Christian converts; and the use of the death penalty for juvenile offenders, which is in clear violation of Iran's international human rights obligations. The UK urges Iran to end such executions

immediately and to allow all its citizens the rights and freedoms set out in international law. We pay tribute to Asma Jahangir for her dedication to the promotion of human rights.

The Maldives

In the Maldives, the UK is dismayed at the continued erosion of democracy, human rights and respect for the rule of law. We urge the government to end the State of Emergency and restore fundamental freedoms by ceasing all interference in independent institutions, and by guaranteeing free and fair presidential elections.

Sri Lanka

Elsewhere in Asia, we welcome Sri Lanka's constructive engagement with the UN, but we urge them to make more progress in implementing their Council commitments. We look forward to High Commissioner Zeid's update.

South East Asia

Turning to South East Asia – its impressive economic growth could be put at risk if political and civil space is eroded. Yet there are concerning developments across the region – whether it be the dissolution of the main opposition in Cambodia, the arrest of Mother Mushroom in Vietnam, the trial of Reuters journalists in Burma, the increasing use in Thailand of laws against sedition, Computer Crimes and lèse majesté, or the deadly 'war on drugs' in the Philippines.

We hope that Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia will enable free discussion and open political debate in the run-up to their elections, which will demonstrate that democracy in the region is alive and well.

South Sudan

There are challenges in every continent, for example, in Africa the human rights situation in South Sudan continues to be of serious concern. The details contained in the recent report by the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan reflect the ongoing and widespread human rights violations we have seen since conflict first erupted. The solution is political stability, and we urge all parties to the conflict to engage with the peace process with seriousness of purpose. We also urge the Council to renew the mandate of the Commission on Human Rights.

We are deeply concerned at the allegations of sexual exploitation in the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). We welcome the statement by UNMISS that restates, and outlines concrete steps towards implementing, the UN's commitment to zero tolerance, transparency, accountability. We call on Troop Contributing Countries with allegations made against them to also carry out investigations promptly, transparently and report their findings to the UN. The

UK strongly supports the important work done by UNMISS, and all the Troop Contributing Countries within the Mission, to protect civilians and seek an end to the conflict.

The UK fully supports the UN Secretary General's 'zero tolerance' policy on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in peacekeeping operations and multilateral development and humanitarian agencies. In the 21st century, it is utterly despicable that SEA continues to exist. The UK will hold the UN and NGOs accountable for improving their safeguarding measures and review our funding relationship with those who fail to meet standards. Our priority is to keep the world's poorest and most vulnerable people safe from harm.

The Gambia and Zimbabwe

But there are also some reasons for optimism: The Gambia is renewing its democracy after decades of oppression; and Zimbabwe has an opportunity to take the path towards stability, prosperity and democracy.

The UK will continue to play its part in supporting these and other positive developments, both within the international community and through its own bilateral relationships. We welcome the recent co-operation with the Government of Argentina to identify the remains of 88 Argentine soldiers buried in the Falkland Islands. We hope that this project, along with a planned visit to the Islands, brings some comfort to the families of the fallen.

Gender equality

I should like to remark on 2 further issues of particular importance to the UK, namely gender equality and freedom of religion or belief.

Turning to gender equality, the UK believes that women and girls have the right to be educated, equal, empowered and safe and that achieving this will benefit all of society. That is because educating girls gives them greater control over their assets, their income and their bodies. Education empowers girls and women to speak out about issues that affect them and their communities; and it can have a hugely positive impact on stability, conflict-reduction and peace building.

This is why we believe that supporting girls' education is a smart investment. More than 130 million girls are still out of school so there is still much more to be done. The abhorrent abduction of over 100 schoolgirls in Dapchi, north east Nigeria, last week is a stark reminder of just how dangerous it is for some girls to exercise the right to an education that so many of us take for granted.

Freedom of religion or belief

Finally, the UK attaches great importance to freedom of religion or belief. Daily, we hear reports of persecution against the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, Christians, Jehovah's

Witnesses, Shia Muslims, the Baha'i faith and others. The international community must stand together in tackling this issue, so that all individuals can practise their faith or belief freely.

Conclusion

To conclude, we are still far from achieving the rights and freedoms expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At this Council, let us renew our determination to stand up for the downtrodden, to speak up for those with no voice, and to strive for a world in which everyone, everywhere can live without fear or suffering, and is free to live the life they choose.

Further information

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