Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Lord Ahmad addresses the 39th Session of the UN Human Rights Council

2018-09-17

Mr Vice-President, Excellencies. It is an honour to address you today.

I would finally like to express the United Kingdom’s gratitude to outgoing High Commissioner Zeid for his commitment and dedication to furthering the cause of human rights during his tenure. We thank him for his principled and considered approach, and his willingness to speak out in defence of human rights around the world.

I would also like to congratulate his successor Michelle Bachelet on her appointment. Michelle’s extraordinary wealth of knowledge, and her personal and professional experience, will be invaluable in this role and we wish her every success and look forward to working with her.

Mr President, we deeply regret the decision of the United States to withdraw from the Council. However it should give us all pause to reflect on the challenges this Council faces, and look more closely at the areas where it can and should improve.

Membership is one such area.

Countries standing for the Council are duty bound to uphold the highest standards, and to cooperate with this Council and its mechanisms. We believe that they should be prepared to make campaign pledges, and to discuss their candidacy at open hustings. People look to this Council to defend their rights, guard their freedoms and ensure respect for their dignity.

We all have a responsibility to make this Council work more effectively, to ensure these rights and protections are upheld, for all individuals around the world. This includes identifying where assistance is most needed, and how best to deliver it. We must start this process now, and do it quickly, because around the world human rights remain under threat.

Mr President, I spoke about some of the most serious and pressing issues in this Chamber earlier this year. Sadly many are no less urgent today.

Burma

The conclusions of the UN Fact Finding Mission have provided an authoritative account of crimes committed against the Rohingya community in Burma. The descriptions of atrocities, including murder and rape, make for horrific reading. The report confirms the appalling and systematic oppression of the Rohingya people over a number of years; and highlights patterns of violence and violations elsewhere in the country.

The Rohingya must receive justice for the horrific acts perpetrated against them. There cannot be impunity for these crimes. The Fact Finding Mission concludes that these acts warrant the investigation and prosecution of senior Burmese officials, to determine their liability for genocide in relation to the situation in Rakhine State.

We commend the Fact Finding Mission for its detailed and comprehensive report. These are the gravest findings that could be placed before this Council. They deserve our full attention, both here and at the Security Council.

The Burmese government must set out how its Commission of Inquiry will investigate these crimes with impartiality, and how those responsible will be held to account through a judicial process.

The UK will continue to focus on ensuring that Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh can voluntarily return to Burma, in safety, in dignity and with international oversight. We will also continue to support a democratic transition in Burma. One that promotes freedom, tolerance and diversity and charts a path towards sustainable peace and prosperity for Burma and all its people. This remains a key priority for our government and the Foreign Secretary will himself be visiting Burma shortly to sustain the momentum for progress.

Syria

In Syria, human rights and international humanitarian law continue to be flouted on a daily basis, with the torture of detainees, bombing of schools and hospitals, and credible reports of chemical weapons attacks. The UK is deeply concerned about the escalating military action by the Syrian regime and its backers in North West Syria, which is putting millions of civilians at risk. The UK calls on the regime and its backers in Russia and Iran to uphold the ceasefire they have previously agreed, and to respect international humanitarian law.

The decision by the Asad regime to name the Syrians who have died in its detention facilities confirms the long held and worst fears of concerned families. It has been rightly highlighted by the Commission of Inquiry and is further proof, from the regime itself, of the brutality that it has inflicted on the Syrian people. The UK also remains concerned about sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls, who have been disproportionately victimised since the beginning of the conflict.

Sri Lanka

We welcome the steps taken by the government of Sri Lanka to return land to its people, and to begin the work of the Office on Missing Persons.

We urge them to make more progress in implementing the commitments made to the Council to secure long-term reconciliation. This includes devolution through constitutional reform, and progress on truth-seeking and accountability.

Yemen

The report of the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen further underlined the deeply concerning human rights situation in Yemen and the importance of reaching a political solution to conflict. We are carefully considering the contents of the report and support the extension of the mandate of the Group of Eminent Experts.'

Maldives

The UK continues to urge the government of the Maldives to cease all interference in independent institutions, including the judiciary, Parliament and the Elections Commission. We urge it to guarantee that the Presidential elections later this month are free and fair.

Girls' Education

As the Council heard in June, the UK is committed to ensuring that all girls, everywhere, receive 12 years of quality education. This Council has set a record in bringing together 152 states to make a joint statement on the need to step up efforts to ensure every girl has access to quality education.

This support underlines the strength of our shared desire to achieve this goal by 2030. However, delivering on it will require genuine political commitment and cooperation from all member states.

To address this challenge, the UK will be co-hosting an event during the UN General Assembly later this month to encourage concerted action. I invite you to join us and lend your support.

Conclusion

Mr President, the human rights picture in many parts of the world is bleak, but we should not lose heart. We should recognise the immense value of this Council, and the wider human rights system, and acknowledge their achievements.

Within the last year this Council has, among many other things, convened Special Sessions that have focussed international attention on the desperate situations in Burma and in Syria's

Eastern Ghouta; it has also reviewed 42 states under the Universal Periodic Review Process. It is vital that we work together to help states implement their accepted recommendations.

Finally, while it is the duty of this Council to challenge those who violate the rights of their citizens, we should also welcome the progress of those governments committed to change, to making improvements and to engaging constructively with this Council and the mechanisms at its disposal.

We know that for the individuals whose human rights are violated today - and tomorrow, and next week - change cannot come soon enough. It is heart-breaking to see their suffering. But we know that by working together, in this Council, by going step by step, we can bring about lasting change. Change that will relieve suffering, repair trust and restore fundamental rights and freedoms. The United Kingdom is committed to working with this Council to bring about that change.

Thank you Mr President.

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