

APPG FOR INTL. FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

Evidence for Review of the FCO's work to support Persecuted Christians

What can the FCO do to support Persecuted Christians?

1. Support the right to freedom of religion or belief of all groups

- A specific focus on supporting Christians over other groups can provide other Governments with a justification for giving preferential treatment to a majority religious group and discriminating against Christians.
- Specialised support for Christians from the West can exacerbate the feeling that exists in many locations where Christians are persecuted that they do not belong in those countries and that they belong in the West.
- Often Christians in other countries are mistreated because they are seen as spies or tools of the West and such a focus can risk that they will be mistreated further.
- Limits the efficacy and legitimacy of the FCO's work to promote Freedom of Religion or Belief (FORB), and therefore the welfare of persecuted Christians, internationally because:
 - a. It gives the impression that the UK only cares about a special interest group rather than the right as a whole or people assessed on level of need;
 - b. It is unlikely that a legal and social framework of respect for the rights of Christians specifically can be cultivated in countries with high levels of FORB violations without developing frameworks that support the rights of all. Moreover, attempts to do so could create envy and hostility towards Christians. As was stated by Sir Malcolm Evans, Dr Nazila Ghanea and Dr. Ahmed Shaheed in their letter to the Sunday Telegraph on Feb 10th, ***"seeking to protect some from persecution necessarily requires seeking to protect all from persecution"***.

2. Improve its evidence base on Freedom of Religion or Belief

- The FCO, in conjunction with DFID, should develop a database which safely tracks data about religious or belief minorities and violations of their right to FORB in the same way that data is collected about gender issues. This is necessary to systemically ascertain the level, frequency, patterns and types of persecution these groups face in order to understand the indicators of future persecution, which specific groups or sub-groups need support, what type of support they need and to evaluate whether UK Government activities are actually improving the situation. Currently there exists a limited evidentiary basis on which to base or evaluate policy to support religious or belief groups.
- When preparing the annual Human Rights and Democracy Report, the FCO should formally incorporate a civil society evidence submission process into the report writing process in order to improve the quality of evidence from which the FCO derives its policy.
- The FCO should promote and develop research on the benefits of protecting FORB and how advancing FORB helps to advance UK objectives such as reducing conflict, improving status and protection of women and promoting prosperity. This research should be disseminated through the FCO, and DFID, to help facilitate the culture change that is necessary for UK Government departments to take the issue of persecuted religious groups more seriously.

3. Train staff working in countries where there are significant FORB violations:

- The FCO should engage with bodies like the FORB Learning Platform to see how current religious literacy and FoRB literacy training for FCO staff can be improved. The focus of training should be beyond simply helping FCO staff to become acquainted with different religions but it should also equip them to assess, prevent and practically respond to religious/belief dynamics and FoRB violations.
- The FCO should make religious and FORB literacy training mandatory for all FCO staff working on or in countries which have very significant restrictions of the right to FORB for Christians and other religious or belief groups.
- The FCO should also encourage staff from MoD and DFID to attend this training.

4. Develop country specific strategies to advance FORB and encourage cross-governmental strategic planning

- The FCO has already produced strategies to support religious or belief communities in Nepal and Egypt. It should develop country specific strategies for all countries with significant levels of FORB violations. DFID and the MOD should also be asked to contribute to these strategies.
- The FCO should encourage other departments such as DFID and the MOD to produce strategies on how their activities can promote FORB. Lord Ahmad should meet regularly with Ministers from these other departments to see how plans are progressing.

5. Support international parliamentarians and partners to advance FORB in their countries

- To affect long-term sustainable change in countries where Christians and other religious or belief groups are persecuted, the FCO should invest more in support and capacity building programmes for Parliamentarians, human rights defenders and civil society in those countries so that they can stand up for their own rights. One such group worth mentioning is the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFORB). <https://www.ippforb.com/>
- The FCO should make more funding available for NGOs who run projects which support marginalised religious or belief communities or which promote religious tolerance and encourage DFID to do the same.

6. Promote education which advances FORB

- The FCO, working with international partners, should encourage and support the development of a best practice model of an education system which promotes respect between communities and peaceful co-existence. This model should then be adopted in the UK and promoted globally.
- The FCO should invest in training educators in countries with high levels of religious persecution to teach them how to promote FORB in their educational environments. This could also apply to religious leaders.
- The FCO should also seek to promote pro-FORB messaging through non-traditional educational avenues such as social media platforms and it should encourage these platforms to tackle hate messaging.

7. Ensure that the UK's business and trade endeavours also encourage FORB

- The FCO should advocate that provisions which require protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief, and all human rights, are included in any future trade deals which the UK signs and that these provisions are legally binding.
- Also, as embassies and the FCO collaborate and work with UK businesses in countries where persecution is an issue, the FCO should ensure those businesses are aware of the issues facing religious or belief groups and strongly encourage them to use their influence to encourage Governments to take appropriate action to reduce persecution.

8. Use legislation to ensure UK response to persecution and atrocity crimes is immediate

- On February 21, 2017 the House of Commons unanimously passed an amendment to the Criminal Finances Bill that allows the government to freeze the assets of international human rights violators in the UK. The FCO should recommend the use of this act against individuals who are complicit in the persecution of Christians and other religious or belief groups.
- Historically, international responses to atrocities that have befallen Christians and other religious or belief groups have often been slow and encumbered by the political process. To address this issue, the UK could introduce similar legislation to the US Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act, which was signed into law this year. Among other things, this act:
 - (a) States that it is U.S. policy to regard the prevention of genocide and other atrocity crimes as a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility.
 - (b) Requires the Department of State to establish a Mass Atrocities Task Force to strengthen State Department efforts and assist other agency's efforts in atrocity prevention and response.
 - (c) Amends the Foreign Service Act of 1980 to provide for the training of Foreign Service Officers in conflict and atrocity crimes prevention.
 - (d) Encourages the Director of National Intelligence to include in his or her annual testimony to Congress on threats to U.S. national security: (1) a review of countries and regions at risk of atrocity crimes; and (2) specific countries and regions at immediate risk of atrocity crimes, including most likely pathways to violence, specific risk factors, potential perpetrators, and at-risk target groups.
 - (e) Establishes the Complex Crises Fund to enable the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development to support programs and activities to prevent or respond to emerging or unforeseen foreign challenges and complex crises overseas, including potential atrocity crimes.