

Alexander Lee and Matthew Geppert – South East Asia - Oral Evidence Tuesday 2 April 2019

Matthew Geppert (President of SE Asia Prayer Center [SEAPC]).

The core of SEAPC is a network for the mobilisation of prayer in 122 different nations. We operate in 27 nations through parenting, health, education, and economic development platforms. It is important to represent that our persecuted brothers and sisters have power and a faith that has resisted persecution time and time again. The Christians in the countries we work in face tremendous challenges on a daily basis, for example, in many cases formal education and development is closed to them and healthcare support is removed. For this review, I represent experiences from 122 nations – in 8 of those nations in 2018, colleagues personally shared with me stories of severe persecution. Colleagues share those experiences with me through a relationship which requires trust, love and time. I have heard first-hand about challenges, loss and pain.

There is a need to gather and disseminate information better and then to find proper processes to apply transformation and change from their hardships. Information without application is only information. We don't want to create a false hope for our friends with what the Review Team is doing, and want this information to be responsibly utilised. Information without application is pointless.

Alexander Lee (Freelance Open Source Researcher).

The Foreign Office is the best positioned HMG department to address religious persecution and an incredibly well-respected Department with a long tradition of deep understanding. But it is increasingly perceived that the FCO has an emotional/spiritual distance from religious/faith communities. The FCO needs to improve the depth and breadth of their interaction with religious communities. Most importantly, those who offer testimony and insights to representatives must feel assured that their privacy and security has been protected. An investment in dedicated subject matter expertise is needed and a commensurate long-term commitment in a culture of deep understanding. A long tradition in the FCO of deep cultural understanding and interaction with local communities is in danger of being lost. New avenues to reach and build trust with local communities needs to be found. This has further knock on effects with the rest of HMG. For example, the walls and siloes in the government has an adverse effect on the unit in the Home Office with a responsibility for status determination, with regards to asylum or trafficking victims. Walls and siloes between and within organisations create institutional failures to share knowledge which are pertinent to each others' responsibilities. One particular way this may be addressed, as discussed in the written statement would be a database of known persecution cases worldwide (as exists for human trafficking) which would assist in making more informed decisions. But of course there would need to be safeguards to ensure that it was known the database was a best-effort and therefore could be misused under the pretence that the database contained all incidents.

Lastly, the "International Church" has survived and thrived under many circumstances, and will continue to do so. Quite often, members of the "International Church" work quietly with no official presence or registration making it difficult to determine where it is and is not working. It becomes imperative to go out to the communities and find out what kind of things are going on in the style of a UN 3W assessment rather than waiting to be approached. This would ensure that there is

sufficient information to deconflict with faith-based actors already operating on the ground, and inform a rolling risk assessment how decisions made in consulates and embassies affect the ability of these actors to continue operating on the ground.

It is vital to remember that although traditional religious faith is perceived as on the decline in the UK, it remains a key component of the identity of many minorities and local communities worldwide and we may be in danger of falling into mirror-image bias by forgetting how central faith still is for many others. Long term investment is costly and a considerable time-resources commitment but is necessary for maintaining a culture of understanding.

Q and As

Do you have any comments about the different approaches between the USA and the UK support for the persecuted church -- where one is a statutory model the other is more unofficial?

Matthew: We would be in favour of formalising the approach without undermining informal relationships on the ground because it would be a visible commitment from Post of them taking an active interest. Our local community engagement can only happen if we have the permission to go there. Reflecting on the experiences of SEAPC, from the outset we explain to all parties that we are a Christian organisation. The success for our work comes first with local government because they observe us and realise that we are to be trusted. This spreads to representatives of central Government. After a period of time, if we do end up with difficulties with local representatives, we get relief from above due to our credibility.

Alexander: In the recently revised 'UK Government Approach to Stabilisation' on conflict, it encourages engagement with local communities with the same kind of positive virtues described here (ie. Long term investment in cultural understanding) [Editor's note: see, Essential Element 3, p. 39]¹. If officials engaged with religious communities before a conflict and began the process of capturing, collating, and sharing information as early as possible, it would then be easier to trace the conflict-trigger back to see how it began. It does sometimes appear to onlookers that "western" governments are perpetually caught off guard, although the UK does a better job than most.

END

¹ [HM Government, UK Government Approach to Stabilisation \(Stabilisation Unit, 18 December](#)