

Statement to Review Panel for Review into FCO Support for Persecuted Christians

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When I first heard about this commissioned Review my first thought was whether it would be allowed to be truly independent - and to say what needed to be said?

My second concern was whether it would be heeded – bearing in mind that the Govt commissioned a previous independent survey on the same topic – from GSDRC (Governance and social development resource centre - attached) in 2017, which came to the right conclusions but appears to have been ignored. The same silence fell on our own Jan 2014 multi-NGO Ensuring Equality report, the WCC report a month earlier, and the Médecins Sans Frontiers and Alliance Defending Freedom reports of May that same year. Having said that I was advised by the FCO at Christmas that our EE report and subsequent lobbying had played a significant part in triggering this Review.

My third and highest concern is *what can we do to make this Review effective?* To that end I've put together some thoughts about the process of liaising with Govt departments which might be helpful – certainly if this Review is to achieve what it intends to on behalf of hundreds of thousands of suffering neglected and persecuted Christians.

My first thought is - *Words are not enough*. Words are all too often a means of *avoiding* the topic - by making assertions about what Govt is doing when this is not the case, or by neutralising requests through formulaic ministerial replies. For words to mean anything they need to be coupled with *actions* - otherwise there is a risk that this Review could be used as an FCO whitewashing exercise.

And the words and actions need to address to the *real* underlying issues. All too often the persecution of Christians is attributed to less politically-sensitive issues such as poverty, climate change, or population growth – when it is clear that the main drivers are *ideological*. If the Review does not address these ideological drivers then it risks being stillborn. It's a bit like discussing what to do with the malaria epidemic but not considering the role played by mosquitos. The Review must therefore have an unblinking and fearless approach to identifying the known drivers of persecution, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and genocide.

For example, there is a great deal to criticise about the supremacist ideology of radical Islam which Pew and Open Doors identify to be responsible for 80% of the persecution of Christians worldwide. I'm thinking here not of the religion in general but of *specifics* like the blasphemy and apostasy laws, the defamation towards Jews and Christians and other 'polytheists' in the Saudi and Qatar textbooks which are distributed throughout the Islamic world. the mistreatment of women, the tolerance of slavery, and the abduction, forced-conversion and prostitution of Christian girls.

In the same manner, there is much to criticise about the aggressive institutionalised atheism of the CCP, the caste system in India and Pakistan, and the drug cartels in middle and southern America. In the same way – and this is where we will discover how sincere

the FCO is in heeding the Review recommendations – there is much to criticise in the way our Govt confers impunity on states where persecution is endemic by continuing to trade with them, pour aid into them, or turn a blind eye to their human rights abuses; one thinks of Nigeria, Sudan, Saudi, Pakistan and Iran.

Military-driven, anti-terrorism, campaigns do not of themselves help persecuted Christians and, in fact, they make the matter worse. It is very clear that our military involvement (some would say interference) following the Arab spring provided justification to the persecution of Christians in the Middle East and across the Islamic world. The UK needs to radically examine its involvement in conflicts such as the Middle East and stop colluding with Islamist actors which signals their impunity to gross human rights abuses. The FCO should also factor into its calculations the potential risk of retaliatory moves against highly vulnerable Christian minorities who are identified with the West. Hitherto, the attitude – as expressed by American military spokesmen - has been that the loss and destruction of ancient Christian and other faith-minority people and civilisations is regarded as ‘collateral damage’. It is this same appalling indifference to the fate of millions of Christians in the ME which has characterised foreign policy up till now – and which is reflected also in the statistics legally forced out of DfID and the Home Office (under the FOI).

If we are to retain any moral credibility on the international scene foreign policy also needs to hold rogue States to account – preferably through the Human Rights Council at the UN. The UK is well placed to persuade the UN to uphold its own declaration of Human Rights - amongst all its members including those even sitting on the HRC! The UN has degenerated into a political organisation dominated by actors who are the instigators or facilitators of persecution; this why it repeatedly ignores the global persecution of Christians and sidesteps known genocides. The UK could also lead a robust discussion at the UN concerning the get-out clauses represented in the Cairo Agreement. One way for the UN to show a commitment to assisting persecuted Christians is to appoint a special rapporteur.

Meanwhile, the UK needs to make proper use of International Law including the ICC and the R2P - Right to Protect. This must include a willingness to recognise crimes against humanity and genocide where it occurs - and to assist in the prosecution of offenders and the recovery of forensic evidence of genocide before it is lost. The UN is belatedly beginning to do this but the UK hangs back – defiant even of the unanimous 273-0 vote in the House of Commons; we should be assisting – not hiding behind legal niceties.

At the same time the FCO can ensure that Truth and Justice take place alongside calls for Reconciliation. At present in the Middle East the West is calling for reconciliation but bypassing the truth and justice bit. Since the ICC does not have jurisdiction in a number of worst-offending states, the FCO needs to pressure the UN Security Council to establish an Ad Hoc Tribunal to prosecute ISIS fighters and other serious offenders.

In some states in the Middle East, indigenous Christians still do not have full citizenship status. The FCO with our close relationship with Iraq – and as a condition of continuing support - should promote their inclusion as full citizens with access to education, and the law and other rights, plus full and proper representation in Parliament.

If the FCO is serious about addressing the persecution of Christians the Govt may need to consider the use of sanctions for the worst offending states - and to critically examine our generous aid to states such as Pakistan where human rights are flouted and reform seems not to be occurring.

In the same way the FCO could review our trade, arms, and energy deals which effectively prop up regimes which are leading sponsors of terrorism and persecution (such as Iran or Saudi).

On a more positive note the UK can extend its offer to *incentivise* reform on behalf of vulnerable minorities – rather like farmers in S America or loggers in Indonesia are incentivised not to cut down more rainforest. This is happening in Pakistan but there are resistances to it being implemented which will require a stronger approach at the heads of state level.

This current focus on persecution is an ideal opportunity to extend the UK interest in tackling modern slavery - to include the recognition that Christians are often selectively targeted by slavers, especially in East Africa. The UK should be involved in an active manumission programme to locate and return enslaved people to their families and homes. The Yazidis are calling for it. There are many people in the ME who know where these Yazidis and Christians are. There can be no excuse for hiding them.

The FCO can extend its offer- particularly in commonwealth countries where we have particular influence - to provide people to train and assist the police - and the judiciary - in respect of protecting religious buildings during worship services, and prompt police responses to attacks including registration of criminal cases, and the just implementation of the law - including a review of those being held on charges of blasphemy. There are 3 Amahdis and 16 Christians currently facing death sentences in jail in Pakistan on trumped up charges of blasphemy. There are many held in prisons in Iran including British citizens but which the FCO have handled badly.

The FCO can extend the UK's commitment to tackling the spread of hate and extremism on social media by ensuring that attacks on Christians are treated with the same seriousness as attacks on Muslims or LGBT people. At present there is a clear bias as summed up by one BBC News Producer commenting on the BBC's silence with regard to persecuted Christians -. "Muslims? Good. Christians? They had it coming".

The FCO needs to take a lead within Govt as regards valuing, engaging with, and seeking advice from a *range* of NGOs including smaller NGOs which support persecuted Christians. This was the whole point of the Govt's own 2012 Faith Partnership Principles and the 2016 Civil Society Partnership Review which stresses the need to engage with

those providing humanitarian aid who lie *outside* of the normal OHCR-based data-capture system. At present it is only the big multilateral NGOs which are able to devote the time and resources to the complex bureaucracy who get invited to the table.

By working with the churches and faith-based NGOs the FCO could help vulnerable Christian communities build bridges with faith-majorities and to find a voice within their community and government perhaps through establishing National Councils.

FCO needs to ensure that diplomats *are* given training in religious awareness and FoRB – at present this is not being implemented in a consistent or timely way.

The FCO has a major potential role in assisting persecuted Christians to be uplifted economically through job-creation schemes - or by insisting, for example, that Pakistan implements its own 5% employment quota.

Very importantly, the FCO needs to coordinate with DfiD and HO who are the most visible expression of foreign policy as it affects the actual *victims* of persecution. The performance of DfiD and the HO as regards Christians over the last 5 years has been shamefully poor and, we now learn, partisan. We had hoped that the appointment of Alistair Burt (who held a dual FCO DfiD brief) and Lord Ahmad would effect a joint working approach but it's not happening. There are a number of officials *within* Govt who share our belief that there should be proper cross-departmental liaison.

Resources: if the Govt is serious about helping persecuted Christians it must start by allocating resources to address the issue. At present there is almost no manpower allocated for this which itself signals the low priority which Govt affords to this issue.

Another urgent matter is addressing the discrimination which exists *within* Govt. As acknowledged by Jeremy Hunt, political correctness has hitherto resulted in the persecution of Christians remaining a shamefully low priority. However, FCO needs to ensure that civil servants are truly impartial and *not* exercising personal, religious, or humanist preferences of their own. Recent disclosures have revealed evidence of serious discrimination within DfiD and the HO and which gives the lie to the frequent assertions that officials are impartial. They are not.

And so, finally, there must a mechanism of accountability – to examine performance as it affects protecting and assisting vulnerable Christian populations - and to include a future audit of the implementation of the recommendations which will appear in this Review. I suggest that the Review should identify some key performance markers and specify a date by which these will be brought back for examination.

FCO ADVICE

It is acknowledged that Christians are the most persecuted identifiable group worldwide; many are poor and defenceless; they lack political representation and a voice.

There is an existential threat to Christians that is not being addressed. The persecution to which Christians are being subject globally flouts a number of rights under the UN Declaration...

Protection against slavery.

Protection against torture and cruel and inhuman punishment.

Freedom of thought conscience and religion (the ‘orphaned right’)

Freedom of assembly and association.

Freedom to work under favourable conditions.

Freedom to participate in cultural life.

Freedom to seek asylum from persecution.

Protection against advocacy of racial or religious hatred.

Protection of minority culture.

The UK has a close relationship with many countries where a great deal of the persecution of Christians takes place e.g. Nigeria, the Middle East, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka.

The most important issues remain equal rights under law and Freedom of Religion and Belief. These are fundamental rights expected of every civilized country but they are openly denied to Christians in many parts of the world. As part of this, the UK, and other western governments, should look to address the behaviour of State and non-governmental actors who encourage and fund the persecution of religious minorities.

The *critical* needs of persecuted Christians have to be met and those who have experienced trauma, including rape and torture, should be prioritised. If the UK is to retain any moral credibility internationally (and fulfil its place on the UN Council of Human Rights) persecuted Christian minorities should not be assisted and not sacrificed to the interests of political expediency or profitable arms trade and energy deals.

There is an urgent need for persecuted Christian ‘minorities’ to know who is going to support them and their interests - and ensure their protection. An urgent and vigorous response is required from the Foreign Office and diplomats in respect of ensuring that these Christians are represented and supported politically in their efforts to return to their homes, obtain citizenship status, to enjoy the protection of the law including access to legal representation and legal equality within the Courts, to live peacefully and free from harassment, to attend school and higher education, to obtain work, to worship freely etc.

Settlement and stabilisation plans must include Christians who are currently excluded from the process because of regional ideological and political biases and so - quoting the Prime Minister - to build societies that ‘*work for all*’.

States need to be reminded that religious pluralism encourages stability and economic growth.

Faith groups make a real difference to countless lives; the work of governments alone will never be enough; for lasting change, states must engage fully with a range of civil society organisations. In some countries Christians have traditionally been the professionals, educationalists and mediators. Church leaders are often trusted and established peacemakers; they are an important resource that needs to be included, and properly equipped and facilitated, to fulfil their role in reconciliation and peace. FCO needs to liaise with and hear from Church leaders and the faith-based NGOs who have direct contact with these persecuted peoples.

In the same breath, the faith-based NGOs who are ‘in there’ assisting persecuted Christians whilst the international community is not, would be greatly assisted by political pressure (largely on the US) to allow these same NGOs access to Banks and bank transfers. This has been requested of the FCO several times over the last few years. Many of these NGOs and organisations such as the Bishops Emergency Committee in Iraq have excellent accountability

Development programmes also need to benefit vulnerable Christians. The UK has an important role in its relationship with partner Governments to ensure that minority rights are respected and protected both in law, and on the ground, through security, government provision of services, and political messaging. So far there has been no meaningful political action on their behalf.

The problem of endemic corruption needs to be addressed. The £42m belatedly given by the DfID to UNDP to assist the Yazidis and Christians return to their homes in the Nineveh plains has disappeared. The UK needs to seek ways to channel aid through to where it is needed without being intercepted by corrupt politicians and local officials. There need to be more robust *tracking* mechanisms.

Vulnerable Christian minorities need more ‘Voice and Visibility’ by foreign policy leaders and heads of Government who are willing to speak out on behalf of them before they disappear; this is particularly crucial in the Middle East where the majority of Christians have now left or been chased out.

The position of Christian ‘minorities’ within new regimes and their place within the future of these countries must be addressed at a Heads of Govt level, influencing the overall international response. The UK should support vulnerable Christian minorities by exercising more pressure on regional governments to incorporate IHL, Human Rights, and Freedom of Religion and Belief within their constitutions. Any laws that contradict the modern understanding of concepts of human rights and equal citizenship should be abolished, or radically reformed.

One potential area for diplomatic initiative is addressing the content of Qatari and Saudi school textbooks which are distributed across the Muslim world and which continue to

indoctrinate their young to be intolerant, to use violence, and to denigrate people of other faiths thereby ensuring that another generation will experience discrimination and persecution.

Consideration must be given to ensure a holistic, security, approach so that Christian minorities can feel safe with regard to their lives and property; this will only be possible if (a) they have an active role in providing security structures in the areas where they are a majority population and (b) if political empowerment secures their influence over their areas at local/regional level plus proper representation at a national level.

There needs to be an international advocacy strategy with careful planning and involvement by all UN agencies. Currently the UN is woefully deficient in its response to this global persecution of Christians preferring to direct its efforts to representing and assisting other faith groups who reflect its State membership and voting block. Persecuted Christians are not having their specific protection needs either recognised or met by the concerned humanitarian agencies - and this at a point where they are not able to access equitable assistance either.

To avoid systemic biases which exist within the UNHCR aid and resettlement programmes attention should also be paid to the employment of translators' interviewers and officers who are faith-congruent. We propose that the UK host a summit on this issue to redress the evident and gross imbalances within the political and aid process. [For example, FCO might explore whether UNHCR satisfactorily takes into account religious identity in its vulnerability criteria, effectively monitors non-discrimination in all UNHCR activities on the ground, has satisfactory vetting processes and faith-congruent systems?].

A summit could re-examine these "faith-blind" policies of the UN (and UK Govt Departments) who do not recognise religious identity as a 'vulnerability marker' when this is so manifestly the case because of hostile forces who target Christians and other minorities on the basis of their religious identity.

Priority should be set on reassessing the standards by which aid is provided to threatened religious minorities. Specifically, the rigid application of the so-called "individual needs" basis utilized by the UN and others has had a severely adverse impact upon Christians and can be seen, objectively, to have been a major cause in some regions of their decrease in population which is approaching 'extinction' as a culture civilisation and people. A more active protective approach is needed for minority groups which are facing elimination.

Vulnerable religious 'minorities' must be disaggregated from the broad-brush humanitarian response and supported in ways that reflect their location, vulnerability, and difficulty in accessing support via UNHCR and other international aid agencies. It ought to be not only possible but also mandatory to assist Christians minorities where it is clear that they have been subject to discrimination persecution and trauma. HMG will need to make representation to the UN to have these matters addressed.

FCO should encourage individual states to consider providing programmes for (1) psychological and psychosocial support for the traumatised members of persecuted Christian

minorities, (2) Civil Society creating programmes, (3) national programme of Religious Tolerance and (4) national Truth and Reconciliation.

Women, the elderly, and LGBT people have successfully been ‘lifted up’ under IHL; the same could easily be achieved for ‘religious identity’ which is no less meaningful for Christians than it is for Jews Yazidis Bahai or Shia / Sunni Muslims. In fact to fail to identify the vulnerability of the religious minorities under IHL could be seen as itself ‘unlawful’. Although under IHL [**Rule 88**] one cannot prioritise or lift up any specific group above another, it is clear that the international community have felt able to do this with regard to children, women, LGBTQ, and disabled people - because it is not seen to be putting any other group at a disadvantage. Currently, the failure to acknowledge religious identity has left Christians at a severe disadvantage compared with other and more numerous faith groups; the statistics on UNHCR activity, aid, resettlement and asylum placements strongly bear this out. Meanwhile, entire peoples and their civilisations are disappearing. **Rule 104** enshrines respect for convictions and religious practices. This means that when FCO supports persecuted Christian minorities they are abiding by the rules of IHR law. It all comes down to how Govts choose to interpret these rules.

We would like to propose that 2019 is a year when the UK chooses what its foreign policy stands for and to positively support Christians and their vulnerable and historic civilisations. We believe there is great potential for the UK to take a *leading* role in honouring and protecting these historic peoples and cultures and also to protecting religious freedom (Article 180 which is a fundamental right on which so many other rights depend.

There needs to be an active promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief so that all bans and penalties on religious conversion are terminated and active steps are taken to end persecution based on religious identity.

It is often assumed that helping one specific minority or one specific group of IDPs / refugees automatically means the exclusion of others and that any effort by to speak up on behalf of Christians, however deserving, shows “partiality”, “favouritism” or “special pleading”. This is erroneous.

We are not asking for Govt to prioritise Christians *over* other groups: we *are* asking FCO not to ignore the plight of the most vulnerable. The real issue here is not that Christians are looking after their own but genuinely endangered minorities being forgotten.

As the Foreign Secretary and Bishop Philip both stated, attending to the needs of persecuted Christians – who are often the poorest of the poor and the most vulnerable minority – will benefit other minorities as well.