

Human rights priority countries: ministerial statement, January to June 2023



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Background

In July 2023, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) published the 2022 annual human rights and democracy report. The report provided an assessment of the global human rights and democracy situation and set out the UK government's diplomatic and programme work to advance human rights and democracy throughout the world. It focused on 32 countries which either have particular human rights or democracy challenges, or are on a negative or positive trajectory, and where the FCDO considers that it can make a real difference.

This statement provides an updated assessment of the 32 priority countries from 1 January to 30 June 2023, prioritising issues of concern but also reflecting positive developments where there has been progress.

The 32 human rights priority countries (HRPCs) are:

- Afghanistan
- Bangladesh
- Belarus
- Central African Republic
- China

- Colombia
- Democratic People's Republic of Korea
- Democratic Republic of Congo
- Egypt
- Eritrea
- Ethiopia
- Haiti
- Iran
- Iraq
- Libya
- Mali
- Myanmar
- Nicaragua
- Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs)
- Pakistan
- Russia
- Saudi Arabia
- Somalia
- South Sudan
- Sri Lanka
- Sudan
- Syria
- Turkmenistan
- Uzbekistan
- Venezuela
- Yemen
- Zimbabwe

The HRPC list is not static. This reflects the fact that changes in the human rights situation in a country may mean a revised approach to where engagement and focus is required, and the FCDO adjusts the list accordingly. Recognising that, earlier this year Bahrain was removed from the list, while Ethiopia and Haiti were added.

Focusing on particular countries allows the FCDO to exert influence over the long term to achieve greater impact, encouraging governments to meet their international human rights obligations. However, as always, the FCDO's human rights work goes beyond these 32 countries.

The statement provides a snapshot of the most significant developments during the first half of 2023. The aftermath of the abhorrent terrorist attacks by Hamas on Israel, the subsequent Israeli military action and the severe humanitarian crisis in Gaza will be covered in the 2023 Annual Human Rights and Democracy Report, which will be published in 2024, and will cover human rights issues during the full calendar year in more detail. The UK is appalled at the shocking loss of civilian life, particularly women and children and the use of sexual violence as a method of warfare.

We will continue to closely monitor the conflict and developments in Israel and Gaza. Israel suffered the worst terror attack in its history at the hands of Hamas. Palestinian civilians are facing a devastating and growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza. We want the fighting to stop now.

The UK is committed to making progress towards a credible and irreversible pathway towards a two-state solution. In support of this, we continue to fund peacebuilding projects focused on Israel and the OPTs.

The UK has also significantly stepped up our humanitarian efforts. We have trebled our aid commitment to the OPTs, bringing the total spend to over £100 million for the financial year 2023-24.

Human rights priority countries

Afghanistan

During the first half of the year in Afghanistan, the human rights situation continued to deteriorate, especially for women and girls. There were reports of gender-related killings [\[footnote 1\]](#). In April, the Taliban banned Afghan women from working for the [UN](#), a decision condemned by the UK and much of the international community. In June, they announced a ban on beauty salons, affecting approximately 60,000 women-owned businesses [\[footnote 2\]](#). The Taliban also continued to silence dissenting voices, including advocates for girls' education. For instance, in March, the Taliban arrested Matiullah Wesa, the founder of PenPath, a local [NGO](#) that campaigns for girls' education [\[footnote 3\]](#).

Despite an amnesty announced by the Taliban in August 2021, the detention and killing of former government officials and security forces continued [\[footnote 4\]](#). Between February and August, the [UN](#) documented more than 800 human rights violations against these former officials, including around 218 extrajudicial killings [\[footnote 5\]](#).

The Taliban continued to target independent media, including through the arrest and detention of journalists [\[footnote 6\]](#). YouTube channel operators were required to obtain a licence.

Ethnic and religious minorities faced marginalisation, prejudice, and discrimination [\[footnote 7\]](#). Qisas and Hudud punishments continued, in line with the Taliban leader's call for the application of sharia and the 'purification of society' [\[footnote 8\]](#).

The UK continued to press the Taliban to respect the human rights of all Afghans and to establish inclusive governance.

Bangladesh

During the reporting period, the human rights situation in Bangladesh remained concerning. Repression of opposition and civil society continued, with human rights organisations reporting the use of intimidation by security forces during opposition protests [\[footnote 9\]](#).

There were also a significant number of legal cases against political opposition and activists, including arbitrary arrests of senior opposition figures [\[footnote 10\]](#). Gender-based violence remained widespread, and there were reports of rates increasing [\[footnote 11\]](#).

The UK continued to lobby the Government of Bangladesh to repeal the Digital Security Act (DSA) which had been used to bring cases against critics of the government, and which fell short of safeguarding freedom of expression. Bangladesh dropped ten points from the previous year to rank 162 out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index [\[footnote 12\]](#).

The UK remained concerned about the credibility and prospect of free, fair, participatory, and peaceful elections in January 2024, that meet the expectations of the Bangladeshi people. The threat of a non-credible election also raised concerns around the damage to investor/business confidence.

Belarus

The human rights situation continued to deteriorate in Belarus due to the Lukashenko regime. Earlier this year, the [UN](#) Special Rapporteur on Belarus, Anaïs Marin, described the situation as

“catastrophic” and “only getting worse^[footnote 13]”.

Almost 1,500 political prisoners were held in detention^[footnote 14], subject to inhumane conditions, including torture. Many continued to be denied contact with the outside world, and were deprived of medical care, leading to several documented deaths in detention.

In May, the UN Special Rapporteur noted that the deterioration of freedom of expression had reached a critical level in Belarus. The regime continued to liquidate civil society organisations and clamp down on journalists, trade unions, and human rights defenders (HRDs), who in many cases were no longer permitted to operate in the country.

New laws further undermined human rights. In January, legislation permitted the deprivation of nationality of Belarusians who had participated in ‘extremist activities’ and the confiscation of property. Belarus also expanded the scope of the death penalty to include crimes of high treason committed by state or military officials.

The UK called on Lukashenko to cease these human rights violations and release all political prisoners, regularly raised the situation in Belarus in multilateral fora^[footnote 15], and co-hosted events on accountability for human rights violations.

Central African Republic

In the Central African Republic (CAR), the human rights situation continued to deteriorate, despite some positive progress in improving accountability through national criminal courts and the Truth, Justice, Reparation and Reconciliation Commission.

CAR armed forces, in cooperation with Wagner Group, perpetrated the greatest proportion of human rights violations, including summary executions, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and kidnappings^[footnote 16]. Instances of arbitrary arrest and detention increased, including inhumane conditions of detention, torture and other ill-treatment, particularly affecting Muslim and Fulani communities.

Civic space was restricted through hate speech, harassment of civil society actors, prevention of opposition demonstration and delay to crucial local elections. The numerous armed groups in CAR perpetrated widespread human rights abuses against civilians, humanitarian personnel, NGOs, and the armed forces.

Increased cross-border migration from Sudan and Chad led to armed groups attempting to recruit young people and to block humanitarian assistance to those in need.

The UK made clear, including through multiple statements at the UN Security Council, that Wagner Group must be held to account and all parties in CAR should recommit to the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation to improve human rights adherence and stability.

China

People across China continued to face widespread restrictions and violations on human rights and fundamental freedoms. In Xinjiang, systematic human rights violations continued, with severe limitations on freedom of religious and cultural expression, and threats of arbitrary detention for expressing Uyghur cultural and religious identity^[footnote 17].

In Tibet, UN Special Rapporteurs reported in February 2023 around one million Tibetan children were separated from families to attend boarding schools to forcibly assimilate them into Han culture^[footnote 18].

In Hong Kong, the authorities continued eroding rights and freedoms enshrined in the Sino-British Joint Declaration and Hong Kong's Basic Law. In May, the Hong Kong government took steps to reduce the city's pluralism by changing electoral legislation. They removed books 'contrary to the interest of national security' from libraries^[footnote 19]. Arrests and prosecutions under national security legislation continued. Jimmy Lai, currently serving another highly politicised sentence, and others were held without bail awaiting prosecution, verdict or sentencing.

The Chinese authorities continued to selectively target HRDs, such as Guo Feixiong, sentenced to 8 years imprisonment in May for 'inciting subversion of state powers'. In a May evaluation by Reporters Without Borders, China ranked 179 out of 180 for press freedom^[footnote 20].

The UK government continued to raise violations directly with China, including bilaterally with China's Vice President, and multilaterally at the UN Human Rights Council^[footnote 21]. The then Foreign Secretary, James Cleverly, set out his approach to China in his Mansion House speech in April, stressing that the UK will not let human rights violations be brushed aside^[footnote 22].

Colombia

In Colombia, high levels of violence, driven by the continued widespread presence of illegal armed groups, continued to have a serious impact on the daily lives of many Colombians, particularly in rural, afro-Colombian, and indigenous communities.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that 46 HRDs were killed between January and June^[footnote 23]. Though lower than in the previous 6-month period, the number of HRDs killed remains high. As well as the murder of HRDs and former combatants, human rights abuses including sexual violence, child recruitment, internal displacement and forced disappearances continued particularly in conflict-affected regions.

At the UN Security Council in April, the UK welcomed the Colombian Government's commitment to put comprehensive implementation of the 2016 Peace Agreement at the heart of its approach to building sustainable peace. However, ongoing conflict and insecurity continued to frustrate implementation. During his visit in May, the then Foreign Secretary, James Cleverly, announced £3.6 million of further funding to support peace in Colombia.

On 9 June, the UK welcomed the announcement of a ceasefire between the Government and the National Liberation Army. As penholder on the Colombian peace process at the UN Security Council, the UK remained committed to continuing to coordinate support and to help advance the peace process. At the June session of the UN Human Rights Council, the UK co-sponsored a resolution enhancing the technical cooperation and capacity-building work of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea

There were no improvements in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) human rights record during January to June 2023. Human rights violations in the DPRK remained widespread, systematic, and completely lacking in accountability. NGOs and organisations continued to report on restrictions to freedoms of religion or belief, assembly, media, association and demonstration^[footnote 24].

With the DPRK's partial reopening of borders this year, the UK anticipated an increase in forced repatriations by China of North Korean escapees, where they face the risk of imprisonment and further human rights violations. The UK remained committed to using all bilateral and multilateral channels to urge China to not forcefully repatriate refugees to the DPRK.

At the UN, the UK continued to highlight the inextricable links between the DPRK's human rights violations and its illegal weapons programme. Illegal weapons were financed through forced labour, with workers sent overseas, often under conditions which constituted modern slavery.

Democratic Republic of Congo

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the UN reported a 3% increase in human rights violations and abuses in the first half of 2023 compared to the previous 6 months^[footnote 25].

Increased violence in eastern DRC led to a growing number of summary executions of civilians by armed groups and a higher number of internally displaced persons (IDPs). CRSV was prevalent, despite significant under-reporting, and there were notable reports of sex trafficking and exploitation in IDP camps^[footnote 26]. There was a 32% rise in violations against children compared to the same period in 2022^[footnote 27]. The UK advocated for a humanitarian system-wide scale up to support the most vulnerable.

The UK welcomed the DRC joining the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights Initiative in May 2023. Through joining the initiative, the DRC signalled willingness to strengthen companies' respect for human rights. Preparations for December's elections continued to progress; the UK also welcomed the DRC's commitment to holding a free and fair contest and continued to call for an inclusive and transparent election that builds confidence in democratic systems.

However, there were continuing concerns about the narrowing of civic space and increased incidents in hate speech. Through the Magna Carta fund, the UK supported Reporters without Borders to monitor media freedom and to train and equip journalists during elections.

Egypt

Human rights concerns persisted in Egypt, although there were some positive developments. In January, the Presidential Pardons Committee announced the release of 27 prisoners and 31 people in pre-trial detention. In May, Egyptian authorities launched the National Dialogue to address human rights issues, including amnesties for prominent political prisoners.

Egypt also committed to giving space for freedom of religion or belief, including for minorities, but restrictions remained on religious expression, enforced blasphemy laws and non-recognition of certain religious communities.

Media freedom and freedom of expression remained restricted. Egypt ranked in the world's top ten jailers of journalists, and 166th in the World Press Index with hundreds of independent media websites blocked^[footnote 28]. Journalists from the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights remained under travel bans and asset freezes, and journalists from Mada Masr, Egypt's leading independent media outlet, remained on trial on charges of 'misusing social media and offending MPs'^[footnote 29].

Many activists and opposition figures remained arbitrarily detained. The UK continued to raise concerns about detentions of all HRDs and urged Egypt to ensure independent media and a free civil society at the March UN Human Rights Council^[footnote 30], as well as regularly calling for the release of British-Egyptian human rights activist, Alaa Abd El-Fattah.

Eritrea

The human rights situation in Eritrea remained bleak. In June, Eritrea had yet to fully implement the recommendations accepted during its 2019 Universal Periodic Review and still refused access to the Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Eritrea, Dr. Mohamed Abdelsalam Babiker.

Arbitrary detentions, indefinite national service and restrictions on freedom of expression continued. Eritrea ranks towards the bottom of the World Press Freedom Index^[footnote 31], in 174th place out of 180, with all internal media operated by the state and no independent media outlets. For the vast majority of people, access to the internet remains limited to internet cafes and there is no mobile internet network.

The success of the Permanent Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, which brought an end to the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia, is in part contingent on there being no further interference from Eritrean troops in Tigray. The UK consistently called for Eritrean troops to withdraw from Ethiopia, and to cooperate with any post-conflict mechanism that brings justice to the victims of human rights violations, and abuses and violations of International Humanitarian Law committed during and after the conflict, and for the perpetrators to be held to account.

Ethiopia

Between January and June, Ethiopia made notable progress towards implementing the Permanent Cessation of Hostilities Agreement. This marked the end of a bloody 2-year civil war that wrought widespread human rights abuses and violations still felt by the population today.

Despite political progress, there still remained a lack of accountability for human rights violations and abuses, and violations of International Humanitarian Law committed during the conflict. In early June, reports emerged of ongoing killings and sexual violence in the contested area of Western Tigray^[footnote 32]. To aid healing and prevent reoccurrence, the ECDO funded local peace actors, helped facilitate dialogue in local communities and at the political level, and provided support to survivors of sexual violence.

In May, unrest in the Amhara region, sparked by the dismantling of their regional forces, quickly escalated into widespread violence between the Amhara ‘Fano’ militia and the Federal Forces. This violence affected communities across Amhara and resulted in civilian casualties. The UK coordinated international calls for the protection of civilians and pushed for dialogue to resolve disagreements peacefully.

Ongoing cycles of violence in the Oromo region continued despite steps towards peace talks. Reports of human rights violations and abuses included mass killings and the destruction of some religious buildings and homes.

The need for transitional justice was pressing as tensions within and between Ethiopia’s regions worsened. The UK provided technical capacity building to the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, to aid domestic efforts to investigate violations and abuses and prevent further conflict.

Haiti

The human rights situation deteriorated in Haiti during the first half of 2023. The United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH) estimates that criminal groups in Haiti killed more than 2,000 people between January and June 2023, an increase of almost 125 percent compared to the same period in 2022^[footnote 33].

BINUH also reported 1,014 kidnappings between January and June, as well as ‘pervasive rape’, as criminal groups used sexual violence to terrorise the population and demonstrate their

control^[footnote 34]. Gang violence was often accompanied by the burning of homes and looting, forcing people to flee. Haitian authorities were unable to protect those living in affected areas.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Turk, conducted his first official visit to Haiti in February 2023. During his visit, he encouraged the international community to support the strengthening of the Haitian National Police, including the urgent deployment of a multinational support force under conditions consistent with human rights standards.

In April, the UK co-sponsored a successful resolution at the UN Human Rights Council requesting the appointment of an independent rights expert on Haiti, amid mounting international concern over increasing deadly gang violence engulfing the country.

Iran

In Iran, the human rights situation remained of significant concern. Women and girls faced harassment, fines and prison sentences under the remit of hijab laws, whilst authorities used force against non-violent protestors. Freedom of the press continued to be restricted. Journalists in Iran received long prison sentences for reporting on protests, whilst journalists abroad faced harassment and intimidation.

The UK called for an end to all reprisals against HRDs, advocated for a global free press as a Media Freedom Coalition member, and sanctioned Iranian decision makers responsible for mandatory hijab law. ^[footnote 35] In March 2023, the UK sponsored a UN Human Rights Council resolution that renewed the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Iran for a further year.

Between January and June, 282 people were executed by the state - nearly double the figure for the same period the year before^[footnote 36]. Two thirds of those executions were for drug-related offences, in breach of its international obligation to only impose the death penalty for the ‘most serious crimes’^[footnote 37]. Young people were executed who were alleged to have committed crimes as minors. The UK called on Iran to cease all executions.

Religious and ethnic minorities continued to experience persecution. Adherents of the Baha’i faith experienced particularly punitive measures, such as detention with excessive bail, long prison sentences and social restrictions. Both Kurds and Baluchi people were executed following grossly unfair trials, with allegations of individuals being tortured to obtain false confessions. The death penalty continued to be used as a tool of repression against religious and ethnic minorities in the early months of this year. FCDO Ministers continued to assert that persecution of religious minorities will not be tolerated.

Iraq

Going into 2023, Iraq’s human rights situation remained challenging. Reports of harassment, intimidation and threats facing civil society organisations, activists, and journalists continued. The UK welcomed initiatives by the Government of Iraq to improve the standards in detention facilities, though continued to lobby for fair and transparent trials and against the use of the death penalty.

In March, Iraq launched its National Strategy for the Advancement of Iraqi Women, however, the rollback of women’s rights and legislative resistance to the term ‘gender’, given instances of Iraqis associating the word ‘gender’ with obscenity, posed significant challenges. The UK called for a clear implementation plan, to help to enable meaningful change.

Displaced Iraqis, including women and children, continued to face serious barriers to their return and reintegration. Many still lived in formal and informal camps and were ostracised and unable to fully realise their economic, social, political, and legal rights. Of particular concern were children

born of CRSV to Yazidi mothers and Daesh fathers who have been ostracised by and were unable to assimilate with the Yazidi community. Iraq's Personal Status Law, which stipulates that a minor inherits their father's religion (even upon his conversion) irrespective of the mother's beliefs, has compounded these issues.

The UK welcomed the recruitment of the first 500 Yazidis (of 2,500 allocated) into the local security forces as part of the Sinjar Agreement, however, implementation of the Agreement remained slow, particularly on reconstruction funding and the failure to appoint a mayor for Sinjar. To advance the Yazidi Survivor's Law, the UK provided funding for capacity building support to the General Directorate of Survivor Affairs. Greater coordination is needed to improve the law's implementation, ensuring that survivors can access mental health and psycho-social support, as well as reparations.

In May, HRH The Duchess of Edinburgh visited Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, underlining the UK's ongoing commitment to working with the Government of Iraq on human rights, including Women, Peace, and Security. Safeguarding the right to freedom of religion or belief in Iraq, especially for those belonging to persecuted ethnic and religious minorities, also remained a priority for the UK.

Libya

The human rights situation in Libya continued to be of concern. In March, the Fact-Finding Mission released its final report into violations and abuses of human rights throughout Libya since 2016. The Mission concluded that widespread human rights violations had been committed across the country since 2016, including crimes against humanity in the context of deprivation of liberty.

Civic space continued to be reduced, including through the targeting and arbitrary detention of civic society and free media by security actors. Retrograde changes to and uneven application of regulations imposed on civil society organisations limited their ability to operate.

Migrants continued to transit through Libya in high numbers, with reports of many detained in harsh conditions and subject to human rights abuses. There were multiple incidents of drownings of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean.

Gender-based violence remained a concern, as did online targeting of women, and the imposition of stricter guardianship rules against women.

The UK continued to champion the importance of transitional justice and accountability and welcomed the latest International Criminal Court (ICC) report into the investigation into crimes committed in Libya since 2011^[footnote 38]. The UK co-sponsored a further mandate adopted in the UN Human Rights Council in April 2023 for technical assistance and capacity building to improve human rights in Libya.

Mali

The human rights situation in Mali continued to deteriorate. Islamist terror groups were responsible for widespread instances of sexual and gender-based violence against civilians and attacks resulting in civilian deaths^[footnote 39]. The Malian authorities consistently obstructed the UN's efforts to monitor, report and investigate allegations by expelling the Director of the Human Rights Division in the UN Peacekeeping mission in Mali, MINUSMA. The Malian authorities also placed restrictions on the UN's Independent Expert, and ultimately requested MINUSMA's departure.

Authorities increasingly clamped down on Malian civil society and political opponents, with widespread intimidation of HRDs, including those invited as witnesses to brief the UN Security Council.

In its 12 May report, the [UN](#) concluded that there were strong indications that Malian Armed Forces and Wagner Group killed over 500 people in Moura, central Mali, in March 2022^[footnote 40]. The [UN](#) High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Turk, said in response that summary execution, rape and torture during armed conflict amount to war crimes and could, depending on the circumstances, amount to crimes against humanity^[footnote 41].

The UK issued a joint statement with the US and Canada following the release of the Moura report^[footnote 42], and continued to urge the Malian authorities to end impunity for all those implicated in human rights violations and abuses.

Myanmar

In Myanmar, the human rights situation continued to deteriorate, with the military regime rolling back democratic progress, shrinking civic space, and targeting the opposition and civil society.

Human rights violations against children and the killing of civilians continued, with credible reports of sexual violence and torture. As of June, over 3,700 people had been killed by the military and over 19,000 were in arbitrary detention following the February 2021 coup^[footnote 43].

Conflict increased throughout Myanmar and access for humanitarian assistance continued to be blocked. In April, the military carried out the deadliest air strike since the coup, killing 157 civilians in Sagaing. Over 18 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance and 1.9 million people remained displaced, with 400,000 newly displaced from January to June 2023^[footnote 44]. The risk of further violence against the Rohingya and other minorities remained, including restrictions on freedom of movement and access to services.

Since the coup, the UK has provided approximately £120 million in response to the crises, including £2 million to respond to Cyclone Mocha in May. The UK continued to support accountability and justice efforts for victims and survivors of atrocities committed by the military through the [UN](#) Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar and the Myanmar Witness Programme. In February, the UK announced further sanctions against the military regime and its economic interests^[footnote 45]. In April, the UK co-sponsored a [UN](#) Human Rights Council resolution that renewed the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar for a further year.

Nicaragua

The political and human rights situation in Nicaragua continued to deteriorate over the reporting period. Independent media and freedom of expression were further repressed, and there were increased restrictions on the right to peaceful assembly. The UK shared international concerns at the unacceptable and arbitrary detention of opposition politicians, activists, and members of the independent media. In February, the Nicaraguan Government's action to silence 222 political prisoners and critics by expelling them, stripping them of their Nicaraguan nationality and confiscating their assets was an unacceptable abuse of power.

In February, Bishop Rolando Alvarez was convicted for treason and spreading false news. In June, in her capacity as Chair of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, the Prime Minister's Special Envoy, Fiona Bruce MP, issued a statement condemning Bishop Alvarez's unjust conviction for speaking out against violations of human rights and seeking to defend freedom of religion or belief^[footnote 46]; as well as the continued persecution of the Catholic Church by the Nicaraguan Government.

At the [UN](#) Human Rights Council in March, the UK decried the climate of repression and supported renewal of the mandate of the [UN](#)'s Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua.

Additionally, on the fifth anniversary of the April 2018 pro-democracy protests in Nicaragua, the UK called on the authorities to reinstate democracy, re-establish the rule of law, and restore respect for human rights.

Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs)

This entry covers human rights developments in the OPTs between 1 January and 30 June. The aftermath of the abhorrent terrorist attacks by Hamas on Israel and the severe humanitarian crisis in Gaza will be covered in the 2023 Annual Human Rights and Democracy Report, which will be published in 2024, and will cover human rights issues during the full calendar year in more detail.

From January to June, reports of human rights abuses by Hamas, the de facto administration of Gaza, and by the Palestine Authority increased, while reports of violations by the Government of Israel of human rights and international humanitarian law in the context of Israel's occupation intensified.

From 9 to 13 May, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other militant factions fired 1,748 rockets at Israel, of which 290 landed inside Gaza. There were 2 deaths on the Israeli side: an 80-year-old, and a Palestinian Gazan working in Israel. Gaza Ministry of Health reported that 33 Palestinian militants and civilians – including 6 children and 3 women – were killed, and 147 were injured. In Gaza, Hamas continued to exercise repressive control over civil society and political opposition, restricted women's rights and arbitrarily summoned and arrested journalists and activists.

According to OCHA, between January and June 2023, 132 Palestinians, including 23 children, were killed by Israeli security forces in the West Bank, the highest number of fatalities since OCHA records began in 2005. OCHA also reported 591 incidents of settler violence against Palestinians and their property in the same period, the highest since records began in 2006^[footnote 47]. Israel must work to prevent acts of violence by Israeli settlers against Palestinian civilians in the OPTs, and to hold those responsible to account. We will continue to call upon the Government of Israel to fully respect the fundamental rights and freedoms of Palestinians.

Israel continued its policy of illegal settlement expansion, a breach of international humanitarian law. During the first 6 months of 2023, Israel announced construction of 12,855 settlement units in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem^[footnote 48].

The UK firmly opposes settlement expansion. The Prime Minister, the then Foreign Secretary, James Cleverly, and Minister of State for the Middle East and Human Rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, have all raised the UK's opposition to illegal Israeli settlements with their Israeli counterparts and emphasised that they undermine the viability of a two-state solution.

Pakistan

The human rights situation in Pakistan continued to be of concern. Media freedom remained under threat, with increased censorship, shrinkage of media operating space, and arrests of journalists. In March, Reporters Without Borders ranked Pakistan 150th out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index^[footnote 49].

Violence against women and girls persisted, alongside reports of forced conversion and forced marriage. In May, the Federal Shariat Court ruled that sections of the Transgender Act 2018 did not conform to Islamic principles, reversing advances in transgender rights.

Widespread discrimination and violence against marginalised religious communities continued. Targeting of Ahmadi Muslims and Christians escalated with frequent reports of desecration of holy sites and places of worship. Shia Muslims and Hindus remained victims of discrimination and violence. Religious communities were affected disproportionately by blasphemy allegations.

On security and justice, the death penalty remained in place for a wide range of offences and reports of enforced disappearances remained a concern. However, positive developments included a landmark judgment by the Lahore High Court in March to annul part of the Pakistan Penal Code relating to sedition, historically used to clamp down on dissenting voices.

The UK and the Government of Pakistan had dialogues on a range of human rights issues, and the UK supported the development of a national framework to tackle child marriage.

Russia

Russia's human rights situation deteriorated significantly over the reporting period. Journalists, civil society, peaceful protestors, anti-war activists, minority groups and HRDs were arbitrarily arrested, detained, and harassed. From February 2022 to June 2023, over 600 people faced prosecution for opposing the war in Ukraine^[footnote 50]. Alongside partners, the UK continued to call for Russia to uphold its international human rights obligations. The UK also reiterated its call for the immediate release of all those detained in Russia on political grounds.

Russia used extensive repressive legislation, including against 'fake news' and 'discrediting the armed forces' to punish anti-war sentiment. Dual British-Russian national, Vladimir Kara-Murza, a journalist and opposition politician, was sentenced in April to 25 years in prison for opposing the war. The UK repeatedly sought consular access and in April sanctioned 5 individuals connected to his poisoning and arrest.

Russia continued to crack down on media freedom, imprisoning several journalists, including Russian journalist Maria Ponomarenko and US reporter Evan Gershkovich. Prosecutions on unfounded allegations of 'rehabilitating Nazism' increased, including against the internationally respected human rights organisation Memorial.

The Russian State's repression at home was mirrored by its aggression abroad. There was widespread evidence that Russian forces have committed numerous atrocities in Ukraine, many of which the UN Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine concluded amounted to war crimes in its report published in March^[footnote 51].

The UK is supporting the work of the Office of the Prosecutor General and the ICC to ensure allegations of war crimes are fully and fairly investigated, by independent, effective and robust legal mechanisms. In March 2023, the ICC confirmed that as a part of its investigation into the situation in Ukraine, it had issued arrest warrants for the Russian President and the Russian Commissioner for Children's Rights, on charges related to the forced deportation of children from Ukraine.

The imposition of Russian legislation in the temporarily controlled territories severely curtailed freedoms of expression and religion or belief. The UK consistently worked with international partners to maintain pressure on Russia to withdraw its forces from Ukraine and uphold its obligations under international law.

In the Russian-controlled Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, isolation and sustained restrictions on freedom of movement continued to have a severe impact on security, safety and humanitarian conditions in conflict-affected areas.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia again continued to make some progress on human rights and equality, particularly with regard to female economic participation, which reached 37%. The Saudi government increased its engagement with human rights NGOs and UN Special Procedures through written submissions and evidence on various human rights issues in the Kingdom, including individual cases. Saudi

Arabia also continued its programme of judicial reform, including through passing the Civil Transactions Law^[footnote 52], bringing greater predictability to the legal sector.

Despite these reforms, concerns remained. The use of the death penalty continued; from 1 January to 30 June there were 23 reported executions, compared to 26 in the 6 months prior. There were also reports of arrests for online political dissent, as well as claims of death sentences issued to individuals who allegedly committed their crimes while under the age of 18^[footnote 53].

The UK continued to advocate for and engage on human rights in Saudi Arabia at all levels.

Somalia

During the reporting period, the human rights situation in Somalia remained challenging. The UK remained concerned about human rights violations perpetrated against children, as counter al-Shabaab operations escalated. Use of the death penalty continued, and in April, several minors were sentenced to death on terrorism charges in Puntland. As Chair of the Human Rights Working Group^[footnote 54], the UK cohered the lobbying efforts of international partners, which successfully prevented the execution.

As freedom of the press remained restricted, the UK worked with civil society and the Federal Government of Somalia to encourage a safe media environment. In May, the UK convened a media freedom roundtable in Mogadishu alongside the US, EU, Sweden, Germany and local advocates to build links between civil society and Government. The UK also lobbied for the release of 2 journalists, Abdalle Mumin and Mohamed Bulbul, both of whom have now been released.

The UK continued to advocate for increased civilian protection, including as co-penholder for Somalia's UN Human Rights Council resolution. The UK also called on Parliament and the Federal Government of Somalia to ensure legislation, including the National Intelligence and Security Agency and Anti-Terrorism Bills, is in line with international standards,

South Sudan

In South Sudan, the South Sudanese Government made limited progress on implementing the terms of the 2018 Peace Agreement. Intercommunal conflict, gender-based violence and impunity for human rights violations and abuses remained commonplace. In the first half of 2023, 1,791 civilians were affected by violence, including 800 killed, 516 injured, 432 abducted, and 43 subjected to CRSV^[footnote 55].

In the first half of 2023, South Sudan continued to be the deadliest place in the world to be an aid worker, with 22 killed between January and June^[footnote 56]. In a country where 76% of the population require humanitarian assistance, targeted attacks on humanitarian assets also deprived vulnerable communities of crucial food assistance^[footnote 57].

Civic space and media freedom were restricted, with reports of HRDs and journalists being intimidated, threatened, put under surveillance and arbitrarily detained^[footnote 58].

Despite hosting a conference in May to review progress on the transitional justice mechanisms required to collect evidence of, and address, past human rights violations and abuses, the South Sudanese Government took no meaningful steps to establish these institutions.

In April, the UK led the successful mandate renewal of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan at the UN Human Rights Council, and in March, sanctioned a South Sudanese Major General who oversaw horrific acts of sexual and gender-based violence.

Sri Lanka

The human rights situation in Sri Lanka continued to be of concern. Despite ongoing efforts to replace the out-dated Prevention of Terrorism Act, its use continued, and the use of other legislation to limit freedoms of expression and association. There were several incidents of heavy-handed responses to peaceful protests and commemorations, some relating to the indefinite delay of local government elections.

In the North and East, communities continued to face surveillance and intimidation by state security. There were concerning increases in land seizures, sometimes focused on religious sites, which exacerbated already heightened communal tensions.

The Government of Sri Lanka's commitments to make progress on truth and reconciliation were encouraging, however, in June, details and plans for implementation had not yet been released. In statements to the [UN Human Rights Council](#)^[footnote 59], UK stressed the importance of transparency, accountability, inclusivity, and of building meaningfully on past work and recommendations that address the root causes of conflicts and impunity.

The UK recognised Sri Lanka's positive engagement with its Universal Periodic Review process in January and steps towards decriminalising same-sex relations, and anti-corruption reforms. Steps taken to address long-term detentions and engage with Tamil representatives in the reporting period were also welcome developments.

Sudan

In Sudan, progress towards a civilian transitional government came to a halt following the outbreak of conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces on 15 April. Both parties to the conflict are alleged to have committed violations of International Humanitarian Law and widespread human rights violations and abuses, including deliberate killing of civilians, arbitrary arrests and detentions, [CRSV](#) and attacks on media freedom.

Despite a number of ceasefire agreements, the conflict continued to escalate, resulting in mass displacement and a sharp deterioration in the humanitarian situation. Although both warring parties made commitments to allow humanitarian access, including through the Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan, delivery of aid remained highly constrained, owing to insecurity and tight control on humanitarian movements.

In May, the UK committed £21.7 million in humanitarian aid for Sudan. This followed an earlier commitment of £5 million to help meet the urgent needs of refugees and returnees fleeing the violence into South Sudan and Chad. The UK consistently called on both warring parties to end the violence, allow humanitarian access and protect civilians through Ministerial statements, action at the [UN Security Council](#) and Human Rights Council, and direct engagement with the 2 warring parties.

Syria

The conflict in Syria entered its 13th year in 2023, as the human rights situation remained concerning. Despite Syria's return to the Arab League in May, there was no discernible change in the Assad regime's behaviour.

Existing vulnerabilities in north-west Syria were exacerbated by February's earthquakes. An estimated 8.8 million people were affected in Syria, with 6,000 killed and over 10,500 injured^[footnote 60]. In response, in February, the UK committed over £43 million in aid across Syria and Turkey, providing urgent lifesaving and life-sustaining assistance. In June, the UK pledged

£150 million to support vulnerable Syrians in humanitarian need while the British people contributed over £150 million through the Disasters Emergency Committee.

The UK remained concerned about humanitarian access. Despite the United Nations Security Council adopting resolution 2672 on 9 January, which allowed the delivery of UN cross-border aid into Syria to continue for a further 6 months, the UK noted that more must be done to tackle the unprecedented humanitarian needs across the country^[footnote 61]. The UK continued to use our position of influence in the UN Security and Human Rights Councils to condemn violations of International Humanitarian Law and human rights as documented by the UN Commission of Inquiry. The UK-penned resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council in April condemned ongoing violations and abuses and renewed the Commission's vital mandate^[footnote 62].

Turkmenistan

During the first half of 2023, there was no significant change to the situation in Turkmenistan. The Turkmen authorities continued to restrict human rights including the freedoms of expression, speech and assembly. Authorities also continued to curtail access to information by blocking news websites and social media, and by heavily monitoring internet traffic.

There was no significant action to address allegations of torture by the police and security services, nor had the authorities provided clarity to the families of those who had been forcibly disappeared.

Turkmenistan took positive steps to signal that they were willing to allow external organisations to monitor forced labour in the cotton harvest, though there were allegations of continued state involvement in this issue.

Gender-based violence remained a serious and systemic issue in Turkmenistan with a lack of effective legislation to address it. The UK supported a Turkmen Government funded study - in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund - into the situation of women and girls^[footnote 63].

The UK regularly raised human rights issues with Turkmenistan and continued to lobby the Turkmen government to improve conditions for women and girls.

Uzbekistan

Human rights reform in Uzbekistan largely stalled during the reporting period. There was further backsliding on key areas including media freedom and freedom of expression. Despite high-level commitment from President Mirziyoyev to allow for greater media freedom, arrests continued; in the first half of 2023, there were a series of arrests of bloggers and journalists, some of whom received long prison sentences.

Torture in custody remained a widespread problem, and investigations were limited, lacked transparency and rarely resulted in convictions. Consensual same-sex relationships between men continued to be criminalised, and forced testing by the authorities continued.

The State still heavily controlled the operating environment for NGOs, and the process for registering new NGOs was prohibitive. Organisations which received foreign funding were subject to additional oversight from 'national partners' appointed by the government.

There were some positive developments, with new legislative amendments criminalising domestic violence as an offence in itself. However, more needed to be done to improve conviction rates and support those affected.

The UK consistently lobbied on human rights concerns, including for an end to torture and for formal, independent oversight of detention facilities, and encouraged Uzbekistan to adhere to its international obligations.

Venezuela

The human rights situation in Venezuela continued to be of concern during the first half of 2023, with the authorities denying human rights. UN experts denounced the continuing policy of persecution of dissent and shrinking civic space^[footnote 64]. Reported attacks against HRDs increased by 44% in comparison with the same period in the previous year^[footnote 65]. In June, 286 people remained arbitrarily detained on political grounds, including union leaders who suffered increased persecution since January^[footnote 66].

While a decrease in the number of reported torture cases, extrajudicial executions and arbitrary detentions was welcome^[footnote 67] there was very little progress on accountability. The UK continued to call for the release of those arbitrarily detained^[footnote 68].

Cases of violence against women and girls persisted, with civil society organisations reporting a femicide every 19 hours.^[footnote 69] In May, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) expressed concern about how little action was being taken to tackle gender-based violence and human trafficking^[footnote 70].

The humanitarian and migration crises continued. Access to basic services, including health care and education, for most Venezuelans remained challenging. UN Refugee Agency reporting from February showed that over 7 million Venezuelans had left the country since 2014^[footnote 71].

The UK regularly called for respect for human rights in Venezuela, including bilaterally and at the UN Human Rights Council^[footnote 72].

Yemen

In Yemen, the UN-brokered truce which formally expired in October 2022 continued to hold. However, there remained daily reports of civilian casualties and fatalities, particularly among children, from explosive remnants of war.

Years of conflict, food insecurity, economic collapse and an ongoing public health crisis, set against a backdrop of weak rule of law and few avenues for redress, resulted in Yemen remaining one of the world's largest humanitarian crises. Going into 2023, 21.6 million people were identified as needing humanitarian assistance, of which 4.1 million were internally displaced^[footnote 73]. Despite this, the first half of 2023 saw an increase in aid worker detentions and fatalities.

The Houthis sought to further restrict the freedoms of women, including through the 'mahram' (male guardianship) requirement, which restricts freedom of movement. The UK led donor efforts calling for such constraints to be lifted.

The UK consistently condemned the Houthis' continued indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, their forcible child recruitment practices, and the unlawful detention of civilians. This includes the abduction of 17 community members by armed Houthi gunmen following the raid on a peaceful Baha'i religious gathering in May, which also violated their right to freely practice their religion.

Country-wide, growing intolerance towards the non-Yemeni population led to recurring violations of the human rights of migrants and a shrinking asylum space. An estimated 200,000 migrants and

100,000 refugees and asylum-seekers needed humanitarian assistance and protection.

Zimbabwe

The human rights situation in Zimbabwe continued to be of concern throughout the first half of this year. Although incidents of violence were isolated, the wider political environment preceding Zimbabwe's elections on 23 August fell short of regional and international standards, according to election observation missions^[footnote 74]. Issues highlighted included a need for the electoral commission to strengthen transparency and reports of intimidation of voters^[footnote 75].

The UK continued to monitor allegations of the targeted harassment and detention of opposition figures. Former opposition MP, Job Sikhala, remained in detention following his arrest in June 2022. The Minister for Africa raised the lengthy pre-trial detention of government critics, including Sikhala, with President Mnangagwa in London in May.

The UK commended the Government of Zimbabwe on launching the Zimbabwe Trafficking in Persons National Plan of Action in April and will monitor the implementation as it progresses.

The UK continued to support HRDs, and to deliver development assistance to improve access to basic services for Zimbabwe's most vulnerable people.