

conflict-affected provinces, with both state agents and armed groups being responsible. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Portal documented 5,213 conflict-related deaths in DRC in 2021.

In May, the DRC government introduced a state of siege in Ituri and North Kivu provinces, putting military leaders in charge, to tackle armed groups. While this emergency measure had an initial duration of 30 days, it has since been extended repeatedly. The UK has said that the state of siege must be assessed on a regular basis, respond to clearly defined objectives, and implemented with full respect for international human rights and humanitarian law. In November, Uganda and DRC launched joint military operations against Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), whose attacks on civilians intensified. These operations carry significant risks for the protection of civilians and safety of dependants. The UK will continue to monitor the situation.

The UK supported efforts to build stability and reduce violence in DRC, through diplomatic efforts and funding. In the financial year 2021/22, the UK contributed approximately £45 million and three staff officers to the UN Peacekeeping Mission in DRC (MONUSCO). In December the UK ensured that protection of civilians remained central to MONUSCO's mandate, and strengthened language on women, peace and security, including combatting sexual violence.

Through its six-year, £70 million, UK Aid programme, the UK continued to support the UN Joint Human Rights Office and the DRC Stabilisation Coherence Fund. The Fund supports local-level mediation and recovery in communities affected by violence and works to challenge impunity of security actors through mobile courts, support to prosecution cells, and sensitisation campaigns.

Congolese women continued to experience human rights abuses and threats to their rights, and at least 762 people suffered Sexual

and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV). The UK provided funding to the Nobel Peace Laureates Dr Denis Mukwege and Nadia Murad's Global Survivors Fund in DRC. The UK also supported Dr Mukwege's Panzi Foundation to help survivors of SGBV access justice and help communities to re-build cohesion. UK funding to TRIAL International ensured the provision of legal assistance and tailored support to survivors of SGBV. Education and health programmes funded by the UK helped enable schools to respond to SGBV incidents and provide post-exposure prophylaxis kits. The UK also funded community dialogues on the principles of the Declaration of Humanity to tackle stigmatisation of survivors of sexual violence.

Alongside our international partners, the UK lobbied the DRC government to uphold women's rights. The UK asked the government to withdraw from the Geneva Consensus, which contradicts the rights set out in the Maputo Protocol (signed by DRC in 2018) and seeks to undermine many hard-fought for sexual and reproductive rights.

Civil and political rights in DRC were restricted and political tensions increased. There were constraints on the right to peaceful protest and increased censorship of political media and activists. Those who publicly criticised state authorities risked arrest, denial of their right to a fair trial and lengthy prison sentences. Two rappers were jailed for ten and two years respectively and a political activist from Ensemble, a party within the President's coalition, was imprisoned for two years. The UK continued to work with international partners to urge the DRC government to protect civic space. The UK expressed our concerns about repression of journalists, human rights defenders (HRDs) and civil society actors at the 48th session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in October.

Modern slavery, particularly in artisanal mining, continued to be a

problem. The UK monitored trends in the DRC mining sector, including by working closely with partners such as the UN Joint Human Rights Office. The UK also regularly raised our concerns about human rights and labour conditions in DRC's mining sector with the government. Through our programming efforts the UK brought together stakeholders to understand the supply chain risks and develop commitments on due diligence, increasing the evidence base around the drivers of modern slavery in the mining sector.

The UK will continue to support the President's focus on stability, while calling for a clear, time-limited exit strategy from the state of siege. The UK will carry on monitoring the Uganda/DRC joint operations and reiterate the need for coordination, to ensure the protection of civilians and humanitarian access to the affected region. The UK will increase pressure on the DRC government to uphold women's rights and freedom of expression and meet with HRDs to discuss progress, and will continue working with stakeholders to endeavour to support the delivery of credible, inclusive and timely elections in 2023.

Egypt

In Egypt, 2021 saw ongoing challenges for civil society; restrictions on freedom of expression, including media and digital freedom; the application of anti-terrorism legislation against peaceful critics; no improvement in prison conditions; and a sharp rise in the number of executions, including during the Holy Month of Ramadan. However, there was progress as some high-profile human rights defenders (HRDs) were released, the State of Emergency was lifted and, in September, a new Human Rights Strategy was published.

To highlight these concerns and others, at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in March, the UK joined 31 countries, including the US, France and Germany, in an HRC

statement on Egypt,^[93] the first such statement on Egypt since 2014. The statement reflected the UK's human rights concerns around restrictions on media and digital freedom, the limited space for civil society and HRDs, and obstructions to justice, including the broad application of anti-terrorism legislation.

The operating environment for civil society organisations remained challenging. In January, Egypt released executive regulations for a new NGO Law, which gave the authorities wide scope to control NGOs' activities. While a process began to drop charges against several human rights groups in a decade-old Foreign Funding Case, several other groups and individuals were still under investigation, and travel bans and asset freezes imposed on civil society workers remained in place.

Many HRDs remained in pre-trial detention, as the state continued to use anti-terrorism legislation to keep HRDs detained for the two-year limit, at which point new charges were introduced. In December, following two years in pre-trial detention, HRDs Alaa Abdel Fatah,^[94] Mohamed al-Baqer and Mohamed Ibrahim (also known as 'Mohamed Oxygen'), were given sentences from four to five years, with no right to appeal. Following the verdict, the UK issued a public statement,^[95] expressing regret at the decision.

There were, however, some welcome releases: prominent activist Esraa Abdel Fattah was freed in July; Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) researcher Patrick Zaki was released, pending a future trial, and journalists Solafa Magdy and her husband Hossam Al-Sayyad were released. Despite these welcome releases, many of those freed remained subject to asset freezes and travel bans, including EIPR's

Karim Ennarah. The UK continued to lobby on this, and other cases

Freedom of expression, including media freedom, remained limited. EIPR's Hossam Baghat faced a criminal hearing and fine for criticising a member of the Egyptian Judiciary in a tweet. Hundreds of websites remained blocked, with over 600 inaccessible for ordinary Egyptians. At the end of 2021, Egypt retained its 2020 rank of 166 out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index.^[96] According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, it had the third highest number of journalists in prison globally.

There was a sharp increase in the number of executions. Although difficult to verify, Egyptian lawyers documented at least 83 executions in 2021. This included executions during Ramadan and, in some cases, the families of those executed were not told until after they had been killed. At the September session of the HRC, the UK raised the increased use of the death penalty in its Item 4 statement. The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, James Cleverly, also expressed his concerns about the death penalty directly with the Egyptian Ambassador to the UK.

There were some improvements in the area of freedom of religion or belief. The number of licenses issued under the 2016 Church Building Law, to churches already built, continued to increase, with over 2,000 church buildings receiving licenses by the end of the year. However, permits for building new churches were limited. Broader challenges remained including prosecutions for 'blasphemy' or 'contempt of religions' and non-recognition of minority Islamic Communities faiths, including Shia Muslims.

There continued to be some progress on gender equality, including the appointment of female

judges at two male-dominated judicial bodies and harsher penalties for sexual harassment offences and female genital mutilation (FGM) were introduced, though enforcement remained a challenge. However, a number of women social media influencers continued to be detained or prosecuted on the charge of 'violating Egyptian family values'.

Campaigners reported that the LGBT+ community continued to be under constant risk of arrest on charges of debauchery, immorality or blasphemy. Government discrimination and a lack of access to gender affirming health care for transgender people was blamed for the death in August of 26 year old transgender man Ezz Eldin, also known as Ahmed Fares, following a gender-reassignment surgery conducted at an underground clinic.

Capitalising on the welcome decision by the Egyptian government to end its State of Emergency and to publish a new Human Rights Strategy, the UK will continue to engage and encourage progress on human rights in Egypt. UK priorities are to assist human rights defenders and NGOs to operate freely in Egypt, push for improvements in prison conditions, and encourage better access to justice.

Eritrea

The human rights situation deteriorated drastically during 2021. There were widespread, credible reports of human rights and humanitarian law violations by Eritrean troops involved in the conflict in Ethiopia.^[97] In Eritrea, some religious detainees were released at the beginning of the year, but arbitrary detentions, indefinite national service, and restrictions on freedom of expression continued to be areas of concern. No progress was made by Eritrea on its

[93] <https://reliefweb.int/report/egypt/46th-session-united-nations-human-rights-council-general-debate-item-4-human-rights>

[94] In December 2021 Mr Alaa Abdel Fatah was granted British citizenship.

[95] <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/statement-on-court-verdict-against-alaa-abdel-fatah-mohamed-al-baqer-and-mohamed-oxygen>

[96] Egypt | RSF

[97] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/16/ethiopia-eritrean-refugees-targeted-tigray>, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G21/106/21/PDF/G2110621.pdf?OpenElement> <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/ET/OHCHR-EHRC-Tigray-Report.pdf>,