

benefitting from having a female Ambassador as a role model. The UK supported a United Nations Population Fund project which empowered girls living in rural communities. The project provided leadership, innovation, and civic engagement workshops in Ashgabat and 5 regions.

The media in Turkmenistan remained under state control and foreign publications were prohibited. Most social media and many internet sites remained blocked. Turkmenistan accepted one [UPR \(Universal Periodic Review\)](#) recommendation on freedom of opinion and expression. But it denied that there were restrictions on media outlets which were critical of the government, and claimed that there was widespread access to social media and the internet.

NGOs outside the country and the foreign media reported that state employees were forced to pick cotton to meet quotas set by the state. Turkmenistan agreed to the [UPR \(Universal Periodic Review\)](#) recommendation to work in partnership with the ILO to eliminate the use of forced labour in the cotton harvest. In response to a further [UPR \(Universal Periodic Review\)](#) recommendation to establish a time-bound national plan to address this issue, Turkmenistan said the new Constitution prohibited forced labour and the ‘worst forms’ of child labour. There were credible reports, largely from NGOs outside Turkmenistan, of surveillance of and reprisals against activists monitoring the harvest.

There has been no improvement in the human rights situation of [LGBT \(Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender\)](#) people. Turkmenistan noted a number of [UPR \(Universal Periodic Review\)](#) recommendations on the elimination of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, but said that this contradicted “the existing views of civil society”. The Turkmen government noted, but did not accept, recommendations to take legislative measures to protect people against all forms of discrimination, including discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and to repeal the criminalisation of consensual sexual relations between adults of the same sex.

NGOs such as Forum 18 reported that Turkmenistan imprisoned a number of conscientious objectors to military service, including Jehovah’s Witnesses. This appeared to have reversed a previous decision in 2014 to punish conscientious objectors through corrective labour, or through suspended prison sentences. Turkmenistan noted a [UPR \(Universal Periodic Review\)](#) recommendation to reform government practices which restrict freedom of religion or belief, and to ensure that individuals are not punished for expressing their opinions or beliefs.

The British Embassy used project funding to support the United Nations Development Programme, raising awareness of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and promoting human rights education. Lord Ashton, Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, raised the UK’s human rights concerns with the Turkmen Foreign Minister during a visit to Ashgabat in October.

In 2019, the Embassy will continue to work for improvements in human rights in Turkmenistan, and specifically will press the Turkmen authorities to implement the [UPR \(Universal Periodic Review\)](#) recommendations which they accepted and noted.

Uzbekistan

The UK welcomes the clear progress there has been on human rights in Uzbekistan. The UK’s primary concern in Uzbekistan centres on the restrictions which continue on freedom of association, of opinion and expression, and of religion or belief. Uzbekistan continued to make progress in strengthening transparency, improving government accountability and reforming the security services. Uzbekistan accepted 201 recommendations during its Universal Periodic Review ([UPR \(Universal Periodic Review\)](#)) at the [UN \(United Nations\)](#) Human Rights Council in May, while rejecting 11.

At the [UPR \(Universal Periodic Review\)](#), the UK acknowledged progress on eliminating torture, on protecting labour rights, and on the release of political prisoners. Uzbekistan accepted UK recommendations to eradicate the drivers of forced labour, to implement recommendations by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, and to guarantee freedom of expression, assembly and association by ending the harassment of journalists, human rights defenders, and those exercising their constitutional right to peaceful protest.

Uzbekistan continued to engage with international human rights bodies and NGOs. Human Rights Watch now visit regularly. Foreign journalists routinely visit and report, but the BBC has yet to accredit a local correspondent. More political prisoners were released, but others remain in detention. In May, a judge acquitted three journalists. He found the fourth, Bobumurod Abdullaev, accused of attempting the overthrow of the constitutional order, guilty on a lesser charge, and released him into community service. The judge called for an investigation into the security service’s handling of the case. However, international NGOs reported the harassment of some released political prisoners. Ex-prisoners cannot appeal their convictions, and with a criminal record it is difficult to get a job, integrate in society, or travel abroad.

There was progress on press freedom, despite significant self-censorship. Uzbek media, particularly local media, gained confidence in criticising policy and politicians, although direct criticism of President Mirziyoyev remained rare. But there was regular critical discussion of government policy, online and via social media, although websites such as Facebook and YouTube were regularly inaccessible. An outcry against photographs shared online which publicly humiliated officials led to the dismissal of a deputy prime minister.

In May, Uzbekistan relaxed restrictions on NGOs, but registration remains difficult including for those dealing with human rights. President Mirziyoyev called on parliament and MPs to hold the executive to account more effectively, and parliament’s role was strengthened. But there was no progress on the registration of independent political parties.

Following the visit by the [UN \(United Nations\) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), Ahmed Shaheed, to Uzbekistan in 2017, the Uzbek government continued addressing his recommendations, for example on the registration of religious groups, reducing the requirement for numbers of followers in a locality from a few hundred to 50. Nonetheless, it remained difficult for new religious groups to register, or for existing groups to practise in new locations. Bureaucratic processes remained opaque. Applications could be rejected without explanation, particularly at local level. By law, only the 16 registered religious groups were permitted to practise. Individuals and other groups seeking to practise their beliefs remained vulnerable. In November, NGOs and media representatives reported involvement by the security services in a raid on an unregistered Baptist church.

In September, the US removed Uzbek cotton from its list of goods produced through child labour. The Uzbek government continued measures against forced labour by again raising the wages of cotton pickers, increasing fines for forced labour, and dismissing or fining senior officials. The government made regular public statements about the illegality of forced labour. Human rights defenders worked with government officials to raise awareness about forced labour and to train regional officials. For the first time, human rights defenders monitored the harvest alongside the International Labour Organisation. Preliminary results indicated that 7% of the workforce were subjected to forced labour, 46% down from 2017.

Homosexuality remained illegal, and [LGBT \(Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender\)](#) people continued to face discrimination. There were reports of police persecution of members of the [LGBT \(Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender\)](#) community, and wider social stigmatisation of [LGBT \(Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender\)](#) people. Uzbekistan rejected [UPR \(Universal Periodic Review\)](#) recommendations on decriminalisation of same-sex relations and elimination of discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Reports of torture have decreased. President Mirziyoyev publicly spoke out against torture, and legislation passed in November 2017 made evidence gained through torture inadmissible in court. In January, the President removed the leadership of the National Security Service, which had often been cited for violating detainee rights, and curbed the powers of the service. CCTV was installed in detention facilities and police stations. The newly established Human Rights Ombudsman was given the right to visit prisons without advance notice. Human Rights Watch accompanied the Ombudsman on a prison visit in December. Uzbekistan continued work towards ratifying the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture.

The UK increased programme funding from £900,000 in 2017 to £2 million. We contributed to the process of drafting new laws on media freedom, brought law enforcement bodies and journalists to work together on a safer media working environment, and engaged the BBC to train journalists. The Westminster Foundation for Democracy worked with the Uzbek parliament on scrutiny and research. We funded the work of the UK's Government Partnerships International with the Ministry of Justice on the delivery of justice sector reforms and of public services. Through other projects, we worked to improve governance, strengthen the rule of law and civil society, advance gender equality, and prevent domestic violence.

In 2019 we plan to continue to focus on further promotion of human rights including strengthening media freedom, enhancing the professionalism of journalists, strengthening the capacity of civil society, and supporting the rule of law including through further transparency and anti-corruption measures.

Venezuela

Democracy and the rule of law in Venezuela weakened further in 2018. This affected civil and political rights, including freedom of expression, and reduced civil society space. In addition, the economic crisis is estimated to have halved the size of Venezuela's economy between 2014 and 2018. Hyperinflation and ongoing shortages of food, medicines, and medical supplies reduced the ability of Venezuelans to meet their most basic needs.

According to the [NGO \(Non-Governmental Organisation\) Caritas Venezuela](#)⁵⁷, 63% of children examined in 2018 suffered from malnutrition, and the Global Acute Malnutrition Index, which measures the percentage of children under the age of 5 with acute to severe malnutrition, stood in September at 9.6%. There were also reports of malnourished pregnant women. Medical and pharmaceutical associations reported an increased number of cases of malaria, diphtheria, and measles, and a lack of available treatment.

Violence remained a serious problem; the local [NGO \(Non-Governmental Organisation\) Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia](#)⁵⁸ estimated that there were over 23,000 violent deaths in Venezuela in 2018 (around 81.4 per 100,000 population).

In February, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court ([ICC \(International Criminal Court\)](#)) said that she would launch a preliminary examination into the situation in Venezuela. Separately, in May, a panel of independent international experts appointed by the Secretary-General of the Organisation of American States found that “reasonable grounds exist to believe that crimes against humanity have been committed in Venezuela dating back to ... 2014”. The panel identified a “widespread and systematic pattern of abuse targeting an identified segment of the civilian population”, and recommended that the Secretary-General submit the report and the evidence collected to the Office of the Prosecutor of the [ICC \(International Criminal Court\)](#).

In June, the [UN \(United Nations\) OHCHR \(UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights\)](#) issued a report documenting “human rights violations committed by State authorities since August 2017, including the use of excessive force in non-protest-related security operations, new instances