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Human Rights and Democracy: 2020 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office report

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Preface by the Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab

2020 was a very challenging year. In addition to its grave health impacts, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated a number of negative trends, including the erosion of human rights and democracy in different parts of the world. It has provided an opportunity for unscrupulous and opportunistic governments to increase repression and flout international law.

Against this backdrop, the UK played a critical role as a champion of open, democratic societies, human rights and the rule of law, including through our G7 Presidency and as co-chair of the global Media Freedom Coalition.

In September, we merged FCO (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and DFID (Department for International Trade) – bringing diplomacy and development together to maximise our impact, placing our world-class aid programme at the beating heart of our foreign policy decision-making. Defending open societies, including human rights, is one of the seven strategic priorities for our development work. The new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is now working to tackle the world’s greatest challenges in a modern and innovative way.

We set out our vision for the new department and for the UK’s role in the world in the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, titled ‘Global Britain in a competitive world’. It is the most comprehensive and far-reaching foreign and security policy strategy published by a British Government in decades.

We want to see a world that is safe for open and free societies to thrive, and we are confident and ambitious about our role as a protector of human rights and a beacon of democratic sovereignty. That’s why we are leading campaigns on the freedom of religion or belief, media freedom, Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict, LGBT+ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) rights, and girls’ education. We have also joined with Canada and over 50 other partners in working to end the practice of arbitrary arrests, detentions or sentencing.

We are ready to stand up for our values in the face of human rights violations, fraudulent elections and attacks on democracy – for example in countries including Russia, China, Myanmar and Belarus.

We have continued to stand up for the rights and freedoms of the people of Hong Kong. We have called out China’s egregious actions, alongside our international partners. We launched a new immigration route for British Nationals (Overseas) providing many of those that feel they need to leave with another option for doing so. We also took a number of further steps in 2020, including suspending indefinitely our Extradition Treaty with Hong Kong and extending our arms embargo on mainland China to cover Hong Kong.

We have challenged and exposed human rights violations together with our like-minded partners and through multilateral bodies, such as the Human Rights Council. Underlining our commitment to upholding international laws and norms, the UK has been re-elected to the UN Human Rights Council, and at the International Criminal Court we have seen the elections of Joanna Kerner as Judge and Karim Khan as Chief Prosecutor.

With the UK’s Global Human Rights sanctions regime, we have imposed sanctions on the perpetrators. In 2020 the UK imposed sanctions on individuals and entities in Russia, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, DPRK, Belarus, Chechnya, Venezuela, The Gambia and Pakistan. Our Global Anti-Corruption Sanctions Regime launched in 2021 completes the UK’s Magnitsky sanctions framework. This will prevent corrupt actors from using the UK as a haven for dirty money, while combatting corruption around the world.

In these challenging times, we will continue to bring to bear all of the diplomatic and development levers available to us to defend the international rule of law and the rights and freedoms of the most oppressed and most vulnerable around the world. This is the mission of Global Britain as a force for good.

Foreword by the Minister for Human Rights, Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon

The Government’s Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy – our vision for Global Britain – places a major focus on championing human rights, democratic values, good governance, the rule of law, and open societies. This is central to our role as a force for good in the world.

On 31 December, the UK’s Nicaragua sanctions regulations came into force. The UK imposed sanctions on six Nicaraguan nationals in relation to the undermining of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, holding these individuals to account, and encouraging the Nicaraguan Government to respect democratic principles, comply with international human rights law, and refrain from actions or policies which repressed civil society.

In 2021, the UK will continue to work through the bilateral relationship, multilateral institutions and the rules-based international system to promote human rights, a free media, democracy and open society in Nicaragua.

Pakistan

The human rights situation in Pakistan continued to be extremely challenging. Restrictions increased on civic space and freedom of expression. Discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities continued. The imposition of the death penalty continued. The prevalence of bonded and child labour, and the failure to uphold the rights of women and children, remained a cause for concern. There were positive steps to strengthen legislation on child protection.

Pakistan fell to 145 of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders 2020 World Press Freedom Index^[footnote 124]. The media came under increased pressure and censorship, through the use of threats, intimidation, state interference and financial or licensing levers. In coordination with Canada, the UK ran a media freedom campaign to highlight the importance of the issue in Pakistan. Legislation introduced in October prompted civil society concerns about online freedom of expression and user data privacy. Female journalists continued to face online abuse and issued public statements demanding government action. Media and NGO (Non-governmental Organisation) reports of killings, torture and enforced disappearances of human rights defenders and journalists continued. Draft legislation on the protection of journalists remained pending at the end of 2020.

Widespread public violence and discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities continued, including against Ahmadi Muslims, Christians, Hazaras, Hindus and Shia Muslims. There were faith-based killings, targeting minority Muslim communities, particularly Ahmadi and Shia Muslims, and anti-Shia rallies. The UK remained concerned about blasphemy charges, including against academics and religious communities, with many of those detained waiting a long time for their legal cases to progress. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) targeted websites and restricted access to online materials allegedly containing blasphemous content- particularly those belonging to Ahmadi Muslims-in a bid to shut down community communications. Attacks on places of worship and grave desecration continued. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing tensions between communities because of fears that specific groups were spreading COVID-19. Incidents of hate speech towards religious minorities increased as a result.

There was some positive progress, however. In May, a National Commission for Minorities was established, although the UK had some concerns about its adherence to the UN Paris Principles, specifically on lack of autonomy, resources and investigative powers. In July, a 200-year old gurdwara was returned to the Sikh community by the Balochistan Government. In December, the Pakistan Government approved construction of Islamabad’s first Hindu temple.

Discrimination and violence against women and girls remained prevalent, as did child exploitation. Pakistan ranked 151 of 153 countries in the World Economic Forum 2020 Gender Gap Index^[footnote 125], falling three places after the last report. Despite agreeing stronger laws in 2020 to protect women and girls, including to establish special courts to speed up rape trials, enforcement remained weak. There were further media and NGO (Non-governmental Organisation) reports of the forced conversion and forced marriage of women from religious minority communities, particularly Christian, Hindu and Sikh.

The Pakistan Government passed the Zainab Alert, Recovery and Response Act 2020 in March to improve the authorities’ ability to respond to cases of child abduction. In July, an amendment to the Child Employment Act 1991 prohibited child domestic labour in the Islamabad Capital Territory. During COVID-19 lockdowns, Pakistan’s Ministry of Human Rights launched a helpline for women and children affected by domestic violence and child labour.

Modern slavery, particularly bonded and child labour, continued to be a major concern. The UK’s Aawaz II Accountability, Inclusion and Reducing Modern Slavery Programme worked with the Government and communities to raise awareness, challenge perceptions and provide technical advice on modern slavery issues, including bonded child labour and child and forced marriage.

Pakistan’s Ministry of Human Rights advocated transgender rights. In February, Pakistan became the first country to include an openly transgender woman in its national delegation to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women Committee. However, same-sex relationships remained illegal, and LGBT+ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people continued to face violence and discrimination.

Pakistan retained the death penalty for 27 offences. Juvenile offenders and offenders with mental and physical illnesses were among those on death row. In October, an amendment to the Counter-Narcotic Substances Act 1997 was passed by the National Assembly. If approved by the Senate, the legislation would lead to the abolition of the death penalty for drug offences. We continued to raise the UK’s longstanding opposition to the death penalty with the Government of Pakistan.

Media reports of enforced disappearances, torture, detention of prisoners without trial and extrajudicial killings by security forces continued. In December, under the Global Human Rights sanctions regime, the UK designated a former senior Pakistani police official, Rao Anwar, for direct involvement in over 190 staged police encounters, which were reported to have resulted in the deaths of over 400 people.

In 2021, the UK will use targeted programme funding to help strengthen legislation, institutions, and social behaviour in order to promote and protect human rights, and prevent harmful practices. We shall continue to urge Pakistan to adhere to its international commitments and comply with its international obligations, and improve the human rights situation for all individuals in the country.

Russia

The human rights situation continued to deteriorate, with an increasingly hostile environment for civil society, a pliant and politically controlled judicial system, and media under pressure. The already restrictive framework for freedom of expression and civil society was further tightened by a raft of legislative amendments and by changes to the Constitution.

Constitutional changes that came into force in July included an amendment asserting the primacy of the Constitution over the decisions of international bodies. This included the European Court of Human Rights, one of the few remaining routes of recourse for victims of human rights violations. Russia already had the most pending cases of any Council of Europe member state. The Council of Europe Venice Commission criticised this amendment as contradicting Russia's obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights.

Amendments to the 2012 Foreign Agents Law expanded its scope, introducing additional reporting requirements for organisations labelled foreign agents, and making it possible to label individuals as foreign agents. New legislation also introduced further restrictions on public protests, including restrictions on single-person pickets, one of the few remaining avenues for people to exercise their constitutional right to peaceful protest.

Existing laws on disrespecting the authorities, extremism and counter-terrorism were used in selective prosecutions to deter dissent. Cases of concern included the politically-motivated prosecution of Yuri Dmitriev, historian and Head of Memorial's Karelia branch, who was sentenced to 13 years' imprisonment in September. The UK called for his immediate release.

The poisoning of leading opposition figure Alexey Navalny in August was a serious blow to democracy and political pluralism in Russia. In September, G7 Foreign Ministers condemned the attack as a serious threat to those men and women engaged in defending the political and civil freedoms that Russia itself had committed to guarantee.

LGBT+ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people continued to face systematic persecution in Chechnya. In December, the UK designated three individuals and an entity responsible for these violations under the UK's Global Human Rights sanctions regime. Two years on from the 2018 OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) Moscow Mechanism report on human rights violations in Chechnya, the Russian authorities still had not conducted a full investigation, and the climate of impunity described in the Moscow Mechanism Report continued to prevail. The UK condemned the kidnapping and torture in Chechnya of 19-year-old Salman Tepsurkayev, a moderator for the Telegram social media channel 'IADAT'.

The majority of media outlets remained under the control of the Government, and the few independent media outlets operated in an increasingly hostile environment. In July, former journalist, Ivan Safronov, was arrested and charged with treason. Journalists who conducted single-person pickets to protest against Safronov's arrest were detained. This followed the detention on 3 July of a number of journalists who conducted single-person pickets to express their concern over the conviction of journalist Svetlana Prokopyeva.

The persecution of religious minorities continued, including the detention of Jehovah's Witnesses who were labelled as 'extremist' and therefore banned. At least ten people remained imprisoned, 417 under criminal investigation, and 35 in pre-trial detention across Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea.

NGOs reported an alarming increase in domestic abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, legislation designed to provide greater protection for victims remained stalled.

Russian interference in Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia led to a further deterioration in the human rights situation there, with reports from local media of torture and ethnic discrimination. Enhanced restrictions on freedom of movement through the closure of crossing points prevented residents from accessing healthcare during the pandemic. The UK supported resolutions on internally displaced persons at the UN General Assembly and at the UN Human Rights Council, requesting access for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Russia continued to commit human rights violations in illegally annexed Crimea and, through its support to proxies, in eastern Ukraine. Russia continued to ignore calls to allow international monitoring organisations access to Crimea, and to remove restrictions on their access to non-government controlled areas of eastern Ukraine, obstructing an independent assessment of the human rights situation.

In Crimea, the de facto Russian authorities continued to persecute minority groups and dissidents, using arbitrary arrests, torture and intimidation to restrict fundamental freedoms. At least 109 political prisoners remained in detention in Russia and Crimea, including 72 Crimean Tatars, many held in inhumane conditions, subject to torture and ill-treatment, or denied medical care. The UK provided support to human rights defenders in Crimea so that NGOs could continue to monitor human rights, and seek redress for victims of abuses. We continued to raise concerns around the treatment of at least 109 political prisoners. In multilateral fora, including the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), we called for international human rights monitoring missions to be granted vital access to Crimea.