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FCO – UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Human Rights and Democracy: the 2018 Foreign and Commonwealth Office report

Preface by Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt

Three decades ago, the world stood on the brink of the fastest advance of human rights and democracy in modern times. During the annus mirabilis of 1989, the Iron Curtain crumbled before our eyes and six European countries seized their liberty.

At that moment, it seemed possible that democracy and liberal values would sweep the world. Sure enough, another eleven countries would escape from dictatorship by 1999.

But from the vantage point of today, we know the optimism of that era was misplaced. Since the turn of the millennium, the worldwide advance of human rights and democracy has slowed and, in some respects, gone into reverse. Freedom House reported that 2018 was the 13th consecutive year of “global declines in political rights and civil liberties”.

All this makes it even more important for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to strive to uphold the values that define our country. Since becoming Foreign Secretary, I have launched a campaign to defend media freedom and a review of the FCO (Foreign and Commonwealth Office)’s support for Christians who suffer persecution because of their faith.

If there is one essential quality of an open society, it is the freedom of journalists to hold the powerful to account without fear of retribution. Yet the overall picture is bleak. In 2018, no less than 99 journalists were murdered around the world, according to the United Nations. Another 348 were jailed by governments and 60 taken hostage by non-state groups.

In summer 2019, I will join my Canadian counterpart to host an international conference in London on media freedom. We have decided that democratic countries need to stand together to make it a taboo to murder, arrest or detain journalists just for doing their jobs.

Our aim is to shine a spotlight on abuses and raise the price for those who would act to silence the media. We can only achieve this if countries with shared values work together.

I was deeply disturbed to learn that 215 million Christians faced persecution in 2018, according to a study by the campaign group Open Doors. Christians faced harassment in 144 countries in 2016, according to the Pew Research Centre, compared with 128 in 2015.

I am not convinced that our efforts have always been commensurate with the scale of the problem or the empirical evidence that Christians often endure the greatest burden of persecution. We must never allow a misguided sense of political correctness to inhibit our response.

So I have asked Rt Revd Philip Mounstephen, the Anglican Bishop of Truro, to conduct an independent review of the FCO (Foreign and Commonwealth Office)’s efforts to help persecuted Christians and report back to me in 2019.

In this report, you will learn about the FCO (Foreign and Commonwealth Office)’s efforts to promote human rights and democracy in 2018. You will read of the countries where we have particular concerns.

In an imperfect world, we will not always be able to respond identically to the same abuses in different settings. But protecting human rights and safeguarding Britain’s national values are not optional extras for the FCO (Foreign and Commonwealth Office). They are part of who we are.

I am determined that British diplomacy will continue to uphold the principles of humanity and fairness that our country has always stood for.

Foreword by Minister for Human Rights Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict

Human rights matter because it is only when our rights are respected that each of us has the freedom to make the most of our talents and our industry.

I work with a committed team of ministers, officials and diplomats across the globe, all determined to extend that freedom and champion the rights of people, no matter where they live or who they are, or what their belief.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on human rights in selected countries in 2018 (see Chapter 5 for individual country chapters)



Countries:

Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Burundi, Central African Republic, China, Colombia, Congo, Democratic Republic, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Korea, Democratic People’s Republic, Libya, Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, State of Palestine, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Yemen, Zimbabwe

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The resurgence of human rights violations and abuses in the country has resulted in large numbers of displaced people and refugees. In November, violent clashes between armed militias in the town of Alindao occurred in internally displaced camps in Alindao, and Batangafo. This resulted in the secondary displacement of 42,000 people, deaths of over 100, and massive destruction to the assets and shelters of already very vulnerable people.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP (United Nations Development Programme)) 2018 Human Development Indices and Indicators report ranked CAR (Central African Republic) second from bottom of the 188 countries included in the analysis.³⁹ The 2018 Global Slavery Index estimated that 101,000 people in CAR (Central African Republic) were absolute victims of modern slavery.⁴⁰ Consequently, the human rights outlook for CAR (Central African Republic) remained extremely difficult and complex.

The UN (United Nations) Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in CAR (Central African Republic) cited the fight against the impunity of perpetrators of serious human rights violations and abuses as essential to solving the country's crisis.

The lack of a functioning judicial system resulted in little action being taken to address grave human rights violations and abuses. However, progress was made towards establishing a Special Criminal Court (SCC (Special Criminal Court)) with a mandate to end impunity for crimes under international law. The court held its inaugural session on 22 October. The UK commended the effort taken by the CAR (Central African Republic) government and partners which made this possible. The court will investigate, prosecute and try serious violations of human rights and serious violations of international humanitarian law, in particular the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes committed in CAR (Central African Republic) since 1 January 2003.

One of the key demands at the Bangui Forum in 2015 on national reconciliation was the call for accountability and justice. The overarching objective of the SCC (Special Criminal Court)'s work will be to fight impunity, strengthen the rule of law, and, crucially, support victims who lie at the heart of transitional justice. Between November and December, there were 2 high-profile transfers of CAR (Central African Republic) nationals to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. Those accused are being tried for serious atrocities, including crimes against humanity. This marked a significant step by the CAR (Central African Republic) authorities in taking the fight against impunity seriously.

In November, the UK participated in the Universal Periodic Review at the Human Rights Council of CAR (Central African Republic)'s fulfilment of its human rights obligations. A UN (United Nations) report containing stakeholder submissions and observations highlighted an array of complex human rights violations and abuses by a number of armed militia.⁴¹ Human Rights Watch noted “the lack of access to the health service for victims of sexual violence due to insecurity, poverty, and stigma”.⁴² Furthermore, members of the armed forces continued to use sexual violence as a weapon of war and as a mechanism to punish women and girls, with instances of gang rape being particularly serious. We recommended that CAR (Central African Republic) should abolish the death penalty, investigate all reported cases of sexual exploitation against children, and establish a national action plan to protect children against sexual violence. The CAR (Central African Republic) government will respond at the 40th session of the Human Rights Council in March 2019.

In 2019, the UK will continue to work with the UN (United Nations) and EU to improve the political and security situation in CAR (Central African Republic), and to provide humanitarian assistance. The UN (United Nations) peacekeeping mission (MINUSCA (Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic)), renewed from 13 December 2018 to 15 November 2019, will maintain its focus on the protection of civilians. The UK will support the EU training mission in prioritising human rights educational training for CAR (Central African Republic)'s armed forces, ensuring that deployments are effected in a way which minimises the risk to civilians.

China

Civil and political rights in China continued to be eroded, with the situation in Xinjiang in particular attracting international condemnation. China became more active in the UN (United Nations) Human Rights Council, attempting to shift the international understanding of human rights to focus more on development, and on social and economic rights. The continuing detention and trials of human rights lawyers and defenders, and lack of due process and judicial transparency, remained important concerns.

China's escalating crackdown in Xinjiang, particularly against Uyghur Muslims, was a major human rights concern for the UK in 2018 and was an important focus for our lobbying.⁴³ There were credible reports of more than one million Uyghur Muslims and members of other ethnic minority groups being held in extrajudicial ‘political re-education’ camps, of widespread surveillance and restrictions targeted at minorities, and of families detained and children forcibly adopted. China cited ‘de-extremification’ as its motivation. We assessed that China's actions were indiscriminate and disproportionate, and risked fuelling ethnic tensions.

Restrictions to the freedom of religion or belief and restrictions targeted at ethnic minorities continued across China, particularly in the Tibet Autonomous Region and other Tibetan areas. Tibetan language advocate Tashi Wangchuk was sentenced in May to 5 years in prison. Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the Dalai Lama's choice of Panchen Lama, remained missing. There were reports of self-immolations in Sichuan.

New regulations introduced in February gave the authorities more control over how individuals practised their religions. In September, the Vatican signed an agreement on the appointment of bishops with China. However, reports of the persecution and detention of Christians continued, and Beijing's largest house church (the Zion Church) and the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu were closed.

Members of the Falun Gong movement continued to be targeted for peacefully following their belief. Some observers, including some MPs, continued to be concerned that Falun Gong practitioners might be victims of organ harvesting.

The authorities tightened their control over freedom of expression, association, and assembly. Tens of thousands of social media accounts were made illegal, millions of online posts deleted, and many online news outlets closed. LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) relationships were banned from being shown in the media and forced ‘conversion therapy’ continued. Chinese Foreign NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) legislation continued to close off international links, causing continued damage to local civil society development.⁴⁴ Freedom House again ranked China bottom in the world for Net Freedoms.⁴⁵ Reporters Without Borders once again ranked China as the country with the most journalists in jail, with 60 in detention.

Lawyers and human rights defenders continued to come under significant pressure. Lawyer Wang Quanzhang was tried on 26 December, having spent over three years in pre-trial detention. Lawyer Yu Wensheng was detained in January, but was not brought to trial. Gao Zhisheng remained missing. Many lawyers working on ‘sensitive’ issues had their licences revoked. In July, Liu Xia (widow of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo) was allowed to leave China, but the next day veteran pro-democracy campaigner Qin Yongmin was sentenced to 13 years in prison. Swedish national (and Hong Kong bookseller) Gui Minhai was detained in January.

The People's Assessors law, adopted in April, sought to promote public participation in the justice system. However this was preceded by the introduction of the National Supervisory Law in March, which legalised extrajudicial detention without access to a lawyer for up to 6 months, including for foreigners. China continued to use the death penalty, with the number of people executed remaining a state secret.

The Prime Minister, Theresa May, raised human rights concerns with President Xi and Premier Li during her visit to China in January. The Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, also raised concerns during his visit in July, and ministers and senior officials issued statements and raised concerns with their counterparts. Ministers and officials met human rights defenders, and British diplomats attempted to attend trials, but were not allowed access. We made recommendations to legislators on several draft laws. We funded projects across China, including on improving access to justice in the criminal system and expanding space for civil society. China did not agree dates for the 25th round of the UK-China Human Rights Dialogue.

The UK was vocal in the UN (United Nations) Human Rights Council. We included China in our Item 4 (situations which require the council's attention) statement at every session, supported EU statements, and participated in China's Universal Periodic Review.

In 2019, we will continue to monitor the human rights situation and to raise our concerns on the full range of human rights issues; we expect our focus will continue to be on Xinjiang.

There was increased pressure on Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Joint Declaration; particularly freedom of expression and press freedoms. Examples included the refusal of a visa extension and subsequent denial of entry to the Financial Times Asia news editor and the prohibition of the pro-independence Hong Kong National Party.⁴⁶

Colombia

In 2018, the second year after the signing of the peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)) in November 2016, the Colombian government's efforts to ensure universal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms were hampered by limited state capacity in rural areas, slow implementation of legislative measures, and the exploitation of vulnerable Venezuelans escaping the situation in their home country.

The situation for human rights defenders did not improve: according to the UN (United Nations) High Commissioner for Human Rights, 110 human rights defenders were murdered. The Colombian Attorney General's Office reported significant advances in investigations of around half the cases reported by the UN (United Nations) between 2016 and July 2018, but impunity – especially for those responsible for ordering these attacks – remains extremely high.

The Colombian government demonstrated a genuine interest in building a more comprehensive protection system for human rights defenders, but the process remained bureaucratic and lacked capacity. Nonetheless, the issue attracted real attention and political will. For the first time in almost a decade, the Colombian government agreed to a formal visit of a UN (United Nations) Special Rapporteur. During his visit to Colombia in December, Michel Forst, the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, highlighted the magnitude of the problem and issued initial recommendations, observing that there was evidence of systematic targeting in the attacks on human rights defenders.