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FCO – UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (formerly FCO)

Human Rights and Democracy: the 2019 Foreign and Commonwealth Office report

1. Preface by the Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab

As I write, the coronavirus pandemic has magnified and exacerbated some of the world’s greatest challenges, including to human rights and democracy. But one thing is clear: the UK remains committed to being a force for good in the world, with democracy, human rights, and the international rule of law acting as our guiding lights.

As outlined in this report, 2019 saw some notable successes. I announced the UK’s intention to introduce our own autonomous human rights sanctions regime, giving us the power to impose sanctions, with asset freezes and visa bans, on those involved in the most egregious violations and abuses of human rights.

Alongside the Canadian government, the UK hosted the first Global Conference for Media Freedom, bringing together participants from over 100 countries. We also launched the Media Freedom Coalition to safeguard media freedom in participating countries, and encourage it in others around the world.

On gender equality, we championed girls’ education through our global #LeaveNoGirlBehind campaign. We pursued our Women, Peace and Security (WPS (Women, Peace and Security)) agenda, through our diplomatic, defence, and development efforts. And we have led global efforts to prevent and respond to conflict-related sexual violence through the FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office)’s Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative.

And we continue to defend Freedom of Religion or Belief, accepting all the recommendations of the report by the Bishop of Truro into the FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office)’s work to defend persecuted Christians, which emphasised the importance of freedom of religion or belief for all.

We will remain leading voices in the multilateral institutions that work to uphold human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. We will stand for election to the Human Rights Council. And we are supporting the UK candidate, Judge Joanna Korner QC for judicial elections to the International Criminal Court.

In 2020, we will carry on our vital consular work, assisting tens of thousands of British people around the world. We remain committed to fighting forced marriage, discrimination and the death penalty. And we are urging governments to release arbitrarily detained UK dual nationals, particularly in Iran.

This crisis has shown that necessity is the mother of invention. In the past months, our international response to coronavirus has involved a cross-Whitehall approach, bringing together departments to support the most vulnerable countries, develop a vaccine, keep supply chains open and procure vital Personal Protective Equipment. The success of that integrated approach has shown how right it is to align our development and wider foreign policy objectives.

In September, we will be merging the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, placing our world-class aid programme at the beating heart of our foreign policy decision-making. The new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will be a chance to tackle the world’s greatest challenges in a modern and innovative way.

We will also be conducting the biggest review of British foreign, defence and development policy since the end of the Cold War. This strategic review, now ongoing, is aimed at bringing the UK’s strengths and expertise to bear on the world’s greatest challenges, including threats to universal human rights.

The global landscape may be forever changed by coronavirus. It has certainly shone a stronger light on the necessity for greater international cooperation. And it has underscored the need for British leadership, as doughty defenders of the rules-based international system, human rights and democracy. So in 2020 and beyond, we will continue to work alongside our international partners as a global force for good, dedicated to making a real and lasting difference to the poorest, the oppressed, and the most vulnerable throughout the world.

2. Foreword by Minister of State for Human Rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, the Prime Minister’s Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict

Respect for human rights and democratic freedoms underpins the UK’s foreign policy. Events, both at home and abroad, during the last 12 months again demonstrated that human rights matter and we, the UK, must always be a strong advocate for accountability and justice. Every day, across the globe, UK Ministers and officials stand up for a set of universal rights that, if fully realised, would afford everyone, everywhere, dignity and allow people to flourish. The UK, whether through our diplomacy or our development programmes, seeks to promote our shared human values, from championing freedom of expression and the press, to equality of access to education, health and justice. It is these very values that drive our campaign for an end to the abhorrent acts of torture, the abolition of the death penalty, and the eradication of the scourge of modern slavery and human trafficking.

Our Annual Human Rights & Democracy Report highlights the human rights situation around the world in 2019, and the role we have played. Simply put, human rights matter. And so, importantly, do those working to defend them. As the UK’s Human Rights Minister, I have been privileged and honoured to work with some of the most inspiring Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and I pay tribute to their commitment and courage. I was therefore delighted that last July, we underlined our support for those partnerships by publishing ‘UK Support for Human Rights Defenders’ in all 6 languages of the United Nations. I also pay tribute to many in the UK Parliament who rightly hold our Government to account and campaign tirelessly for the fundamental rights of others across the world.

We have continued our work across a broad spectrum of human rights. We have worked closely with Nobel Laureates, Nadia Murad and Dr Denis Mukwege, in particular, to develop the Murad Code: a global standard for documenting the crimes of conflict-related sexual violence. As the Prime Minister’s Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict, I was delighted to welcome Her Royal Highness The Countess of Wessex as our new champion for the UK’s Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative ([PSVI \(Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative\)](#)), and the Women, Peace and Security agenda. In October, we also announced our first [PSVI \(Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative\)](#) Survivor Champions, Nadine Tunasi and Kolbassia Haoussou, who are helping to shape a survivor-centred approach to our policy and programming.

Protecting the rights of people of all faiths or beliefs continues to be a top priority. Last year, we backed the creation of a new International Day to Commemorate Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief. In July, at the second Ministerial Conference to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington DC, I announced that the Government would implement all of the recommendations from the Bishop of Truro’s review into the persecution of Christians. We have now implemented 11 of the Bishop’s 22 recommendations under the stewardship of Rehman Chisti MP, who succeeded me as the PM’s Envoy in September 2019.

In July, as part of our 2019 campaign to Defend Media Freedom, we co-hosted the first Global Conference for Media Freedom alongside Canada in London and appointed Amal Clooney as our first Envoy in this area. The event attracted over 1,500 participants from more than 100 countries, including 60 Ministers. The High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom, headed by Lord Neuberger, was established and we have now built a Media Freedom Coalition, alongside more than 30 other governments, committing to share best practice, and lobby on specific cases around the world. This remains a priority.

Across the spectrum of human rights, to end discrimination for all, we have sought to bring renewed focus to issues and build alliances. The UK took on the role of chair of the Equal Rights Coalition last summer and we have ambitious plans to re-energise its work and tackle injustices. As recent events have shown, the scourge of racism still plagues the world and we should renew our commitment to tackling its root causes in our battle for equality. We continue to strive for the eradication of modern slavery by 2030. Our Call to Action to end Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking has now been endorsed by over 90 countries, and we have appointed Jennifer Townson as our new International Migration and Modern Slavery Envoy.

2019 was the last year of our term as an elected member of the UN Human Rights Council ([HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#)). We continue to actively shape the outcomes of the UN’s human rights work in Geneva. We have now launched our re-election campaign for the 2021 to 2023 term, focused on promoting inclusive democracies and freedom of expression, as we continue to show leadership on the human rights issues dominating the global agenda. We have pledged to strengthen our work for gender equality, including the full, effective and meaningful participation of women in political, economic, and social life. As part of our commitment to these priorities, we appointed Rita French in May 2019 to the new role of UK International Ambassador for Human Rights.

Looking back on 2019 provides a stark reminder of just how much COVID-19 has changed our lives. Measures taken by states recently around the world to control the virus have had profound effects on people’s freedoms and rights. The crisis has had a particularly significant impact on the most vulnerable and marginalised. For me, COVID-19 has also served as a reminder to us all of the interdependency of humanity. From our homes and our towns, to nations and internationally, the need for us to work together to overcome shared challenges has never been greater. So, as we evaluate priorities and re-examine relationships to build back better and greener, it is vitally important that we, as citizens of the world, not only reclaim our human rights, but work to strengthen them

3. Chapter 1: Human Rights and democracy priority themes

3.1 Democracy and democratic freedoms

Democracy and respect for human rights are fundamental values. They are the foundations on which strong institutions, responsible and accountable government, a free press, the rule of law, and equal rights for all people are built.

In recent years, the global democratic environment has altered, and the pace of democratisation is slowing. Evidence from Freedom House shows that 2019 was the 14th consecutive year of democratic decline.¹ The growing influence and threat presented by authoritarian states has continued to contribute to this decline.

One of the greatest threats to democracy comes from hostile state activity in cyber space. In 2019, the then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, delivered a speech that warned of the damage which authoritarian states and cyber-attacks do to the credibility of the democratic process.² Reflecting the UK’s position as a global leader in technology, we engaged partners across the UK government and civil society on cybersecurity, disinformation, and the erosion of human rights online. From 2017 to 2018 until 2019 to 2020, we have spent £62 million, to reduce the impact of Russian disinformation across wider Europe, through our Counter Disinformation and Media Development programme, funded by the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF (Conflict, Stability and Security Fund)). We have also used our work as a member of the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC (Freedom Online Coalition)) to defend a free, open, and secure internet, and to promote the protection of human rights online in the same way as they are protected offline. The Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, reinforced this message in his speech to the UN General Assembly in September.³

One of the ways that the UK defends democracy is through providing support to electoral processes. In 2019, we continued to provide technical and financial assistance and observers to election observation missions run by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe)) and by the EU. For example, we funded the participation of 4 long-term and 36 short-term UK observers to the election observation mission run by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights)) to Uzbekistan for its parliamentary elections. We followed Somalia’s preparations for elections in 2020 to 2021, which could be the first one-person-one-vote elections held in the country since 1969. The UK used our diplomatic influence to support efforts to develop a democratic electoral model and to build political consensus. We also closely followed the elections in Guatemala and the Embassy participated in election monitoring during both rounds of voting (June and August).

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy))

Established in 1992, WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) is an arms-length body of the FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) dedicated to supporting democracy around the world. With offices in 33 countries, WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) partners with UK political parties, parliaments, and institutions to help bolster and strengthen human rights globally, by making countries’ political systems fairer, more inclusive, and more accountable. WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) also recruits international election observers for the UK and helps ensure that elections around the world are credible and inclusive.

In October in the Western Balkans, WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) established the Human Rights and Gender Network of MPs (HUGEN (Human Rights and Gender Network)) to support parliaments across the region in reaching international standards for human rights and gender equality. HUGEN (Human Rights and Gender Network) supports human rights and gender equality through peer-to-peer learning, sharing best practice, and improving parliaments’ oversight of the implementation of laws and policies related to gender and human rights. In Kenya, WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) supported local disabled persons’ organisations in lobbying for disabled people to be included in politics, leading to the creation of inclusive disability laws that we expect to be enacted in 2020. In Uganda, WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) has worked with parliament, the youth parliament, young MPs, and other youth-focused groups to support the representation and inclusion of young people. In March, WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) organised a conference in Kampala that attracted over 200 participants from more than ten countries, and resulted in parliament looking into cutting nomination fees, which are a big barrier for young people entering politics.

During 2019, WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) adopted an integrated approach to electoral reform, engaging political parties, parliaments, civil society organisations, and electoral bodies before, during, and after elections to help bolster democratic governance. The UK sent election observers to participate in 6 election observation missions in:

- El Salvador
- Nigeria
- Senegal
- Malawi
- Tunisia
- and Kosovo

WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) delivered an independent technical report to the national electoral commission of Democratic Republic of Congo ahead of the January 2019 vote. The report set out a list of recommendations to the commission on how to use electronic voting machines in a safe, effective, and transparent manner in the upcoming election. WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) also worked with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, a German political foundation, to help train political party polling agents, providing local partners with the skills needed to support a credible electoral process.

In Indonesia, WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) helped local and national government to apply innovative techniques to review laws intended to combat discrimination and human rights violations in local regulations, to make sure they achieve their intended outcome. This built on WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy)'s previous support for the House of Representatives as they helped bring new counter-terrorism legislation into line with international human rights principles.

The UK government continues to fund the 'Inclusive and Accountable Politics' programme, delivered by WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy). The programme covers countries eligible for Overseas Development Assistance. In 2019, £3.7 million was spent on supporting greater inclusion of women and under-represented groups in formal and informal political processes, improving accountability through more robust scrutiny of government performance, and generating evidence about the effectiveness of democracy support in different political contexts.

WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) is the lead partner of an FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office)-sponsored programme, the Commonwealth Partnership for Democracy, which is helping 18 Commonwealth countries to improve the representation of women, young people, people with disabilities, and LGBT people in the democratic process. WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) brings together parliamentarians and civil society - on local, global, regional, and in-country platforms - to address complex problems and barriers to political access, with input from members of these marginalised groups.

WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) is also working to build capacity in new democracies such as The Gambia, and supporting women parliamentarians in Nepal. In collaboration with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK (CPA UK), WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) is working with The Gambia's National Assembly, supporting a research and library unit to enable evidence-based debate among National Assembly members, supporting the digitisation of parliamentary records and providing training to newly-elected representatives. ⁴ In Nepal WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) is providing support to some of the newly-elected female legislators. Through the programme, WFD (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) are working with them both in their parliamentary work as well as increasing their profile and strengthening networks amongst their constituencies. ⁵

The Community of Democracies

The Community of Democracies (CoD (Community of Democracies)) is an intergovernmental coalition of states that aims to support democratic rules, expand political participation, advance and protect democratic freedoms, and strengthening democratic norms and institutions around the world.

The UK started the year as the chair of the Governing Council of the CoD (Community of Democracies), concluding our 6-month term in March. In 2019, the Governing Council expanded to include North Macedonia and Georgia, while Romania began its 2-year role as chair of the Presidency in September.

In January, we hosted the Governing Council in London to discuss the importance of democratic participation, devolution in the UK, media freedom, and democratic resilience. The Minister for Foreign Affairs for the Maldives, Abdulla Shahid, spoke about his country's democratic journey.

The UK provided financial support for the CoD (Community of Democracies)'s fact-finding missions. The aim of the fact-finding missions is to open dialogue with countries seeking to strengthen their democracies. This included a mission to Mali in July, and to The Gambia in November. During the missions, representatives of Governing Council member states and of the International Steering Committee (representing national and regional NGOs) met representatives of government and local civil society. These missions will be followed in 2020 by a fact-finding mission to Armenia, and a publication setting out the democratic landscape in these countries, as well as recommendations for the Governing Council to implement in support of democratic governance in Mali, The Gambia, and Armenia.

3.2 Civil society

Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression is essential to any functioning democracy. Citizens must be able to discuss and debate freely, challenge their governments, and make informed decisions on the issues that affect them. However, according to the NGO (Non Governmental Organisations) Article 19, 5.5 billion people are now living in countries that have seen an overall decline in freedom of expression over the last decade, with freedom of expression now at a 10 year low. ⁶ In 2019, at least 213 internet shutdowns were documented, up from 196 in 2018, greatly restricting freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly and association for many people around the world at democratically critical times. In Kashmir, the Government of India detained political leaders and restricted protests, and telephone and internet services. There were 106 internet shutdowns in India in 2019, according to the website Internet Shutdown Tracker. The UK continued to support Access Now and their #KeepItOn campaign, which brings together a coalition of over 200 organisations from 75 countries in a global effort to counter internet shutdowns. We also

continued to work closely with the Freedom Online Coalition ([FOC \(Freedom Online Coalition\)](#)), a partnership of 30 governments committed to advancing internet freedom. In May, we joined the organisation in releasing a joint statement on defending civic space online.

Freedom of expression continued to decline in Egypt. At the end of 2019, over 500 websites remained blocked, and 26 journalists were in prison. On 24 November, security forces raided one of the last independent news outlets, Mada Masr. The UK was the first country to comment publicly later that day. All staff members from Mada Masr were subsequently released. In South Sudan, a systematic clampdown on the media, censorship, shrinking civil rights space, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary arrests continued to restrict freedom of expression severely. The UK continued to support initiatives that improved and defended the legal protection of human rights. In May, the Myanmar government pardoned 2 Reuters journalists, who had been imprisoned for over 500 days for investigating military atrocities. The UK was a prominent advocate on behalf of the 2 journalists, and welcomed the government’s decision. Nevertheless, the space for free expression in Myanmar continued to shrink in 2019.

In Cuba, freedom of expression continued to be subject to restrictions, with reports of arbitrary arrests. The Cuban government continued to use short-term detentions as a tool to stem dissent. The UK raised human rights concerns directly with the Cuban government, including at ministerial level. In Iraq, the environment for journalists and the media became increasingly oppressive after large-scale anti-Government protests broke out in October. The last months of 2019 saw acts of intimidation by Iraqi security forces against journalists and media organisations, and the suppression of information, including the internet. Over 500 people were killed in the protests, with many thousands injured. In October, the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, made clear to the former Iraqi Prime Minister Abdul-Mehdi that the UK condemned these actions.

We continued to advocate the right to freedom of expression at the UN Human Rights Council ([HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#)). In July, the UK co-sponsored a joint ² statement alongside Canada and the Netherlands, reiterating our commitment to defending the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

Human rights defenders

Human rights defenders (HRDs) play an essential and courageous role in promoting and protecting democracy, respect for human rights, and the rule of law. They fight every day to protect human rights for all, often putting themselves, and their loved ones, at great risk. According to the [NGO \(Non Governmental Organisations\) Frontline Defenders](#), 304 human rights defenders were killed in 2019 alone. ³ It is right that we recognise and support the excellent work they do.

In his annual report, the then UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of HRDs, Michel Forst, highlighted the continued “systematic discrimination, marginalisation and repression” that many women HRDs (WHRDs) face as a result of their work. ⁴ In 2019, WHRDs continue to face a growing threat online, with online smear campaigns and defamation aiming to intimidate and shame them and deter them from their work being a daily occurrence for many.

In July, we published the document ‘UK Support for Human Rights Defenders’ to emphasise the UK’s support for HRDs. ⁵ To produce the document, we consulted a number of partner NGOs, British embassies and high commissions, and HRDs themselves. The document is available in all 6 UN languages.

Three years on from the signing of the peace deal, Colombia continued to struggle to protect HRDs. According to the UN ⁶, there were 108 confirmed killings in 2019. The UK directly supported approximately 450 at-risk HRDs in 2019, through training to improve protection and security, as well as legal support to fight impunity in cases of attacks. In Brazil, the work and safety of HRDs remain under threat, especially for those focusing on land conflicts, environmental harms, and the rights of indigenous people. Through our bilateral programme, the UK contributed to the protection of, and respect for, HRDs in the Brazilian state of Pará by improving access to security measures and strengthening community self-protection networks.

In Afghanistan, HRDs continued to face a high level of threat to life and liberty from both state and non-state actors. The British Embassy in Kabul undertook a range of programmes that aimed to protect vulnerable groups and support those working to defend human rights. Meanwhile in Nicaragua, we remained concerned by the continuing reports of harassment of HRDs, restrictions imposed on freedom of expression, curtailment of political rights, and the imprisonment of opponents of the regime. We continued to press for an end to abuses, a resumption of dialogue, and the unconditional release of all political prisoners. The UK encouraged Thailand to uphold its commitment to creating genuine political space following long-awaited elections in March. There was concern over the treatment of HRDs, including through the Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation ([SLAPP \(Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation\)](#)), and over the disappearance of Thai, Lao, and Vietnamese dissidents in neighbouring states in the region. In Turkey, we were concerned by the use of anti-terror legislation to restrict the legitimate activities of HRDs. As observers, we attended the trials of a number of journalists and HRDs, and raised key issues with the Turkish authorities.

The UK co-sponsored the UN General Assembly resolution on HRDs during its 74th Session. The resolution’s aims were to create stronger global standards of support for HRDs, promote the legitimacy of HRDs, and protect them against threats, harassment, reprisals, and killings. The UK Mission to the UN also worked with the International Service for Human Rights to provide training and opportunities for HRDs from around the globe. This included the opportunity to conduct advocacy at the UN in New York, and engage with UN mechanisms.

Restrictions of civil society space

A vibrant and diverse civil society enables all people – including those who find themselves socially, politically, and economically marginalised within society – to express their priorities, aspirations, and concerns, and is an essential component of any healthy democracy. In 2019, the role of civil society organisations (CSOs (civil society organisations)) in amplifying grass root voices was increasingly challenged, and open civic space was faced growing threats around the world. The CIVICUS Monitor ¹² rated civic space as ‘open’ in just 43 of 196 countries, assessing 42 as ‘Narrowed’, 49 as ‘Obstructed’, 38 as ‘Repressed’ and 24 as ‘Closed’. ¹³

In Vietnam, those peacefully exercising their constitutional rights were subjected to violence, harassment, and detention by government forces. The UK encouraged Vietnam to improve protection of the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly by reviewing existing legislation, and by publishing and implementing clear and transparent guidelines on security personnel conduct in managing peaceful demonstrations. In Syria, the regime continued to exert pressure on civil society activists. This included refusing to grant civil society organisations legal status. The space for civil society in Libya became increasingly restricted. Presidency Council Decree 286 (2018) continued to limit the activity of civil society groups, prohibiting them from receiving international donations and from engaging in activity related to political, military, or security matters. Over a 30 month period finishing in March 2020, the UK provided £2.75 million in funding from the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF (Conflict, Stability and Security Fund)) to build the capacity of local civil society partners across the east, west, and south of Libya.

The UK continued to support civil society activists including through funding for civil society organisations and women’s groups, and for those pursuing justice and accountability. In 2019, DFID (Department for International Development) provided £1.9 million in new funding for 2 consortia to work with local CSOs (civil society organisations) in 6 countries, to increase effective approaches to building free and open societies in developing and fragile countries.

Peaceful protests that took place during the revolution in Sudan in 2019 were met with a violent response from security services. The then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, condemned the violence, and the then Minister for Africa, Harriett Baldwin, summoned the Sudanese Ambassador after the violent attack on 3 June. The UK welcomed the subsequent political changes that the protestors called for, and supported Sudan in its transition to a democratic future.

3.3 Media Freedom

The UK ran a major international campaign in 2019 on Media Freedom. This reflected growing concern about constraints on free and independent media around the world, with 2018 having been the worst year on record for violence and abuses against journalists.

In July the first Global Conference for Media Freedom took place in London, co-hosted by the UK and Canada. It attracted over 1,500 participants from over 100 countries, with 60 ministers attending. Several initiatives were launched:

Media Freedom Coalition: 33 countries signed the Global Pledge ¹⁴ on Media Freedom and formed the Media Freedom Coalition, committing to raise media freedom, share best practice, and lobby on specific cases around the globe. The Coalition was then formally launched at an event in the margins of the UN General Assembly (UNGA (UN General Assembly)) in September which was chaired by Amal Clooney, the Foreign Secretary’s Special Envoy on Media Freedom, and co-hosted by Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon and key international partners. In 2020, the Coalition will develop a rapid response mechanism to respond to attacks on, or killings of, journalists, and to emerging situations of concern.

Global Media Defence Fund: administered by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), the fund’s aim is to ensure effective legal assistance and support to civil society and journalists, including training for journalists. The UK committed £3 million over a period of 5 years, with a further \$1 million contribution from Canada. The first Steering Committee took place in November, where priorities for the fund were set, with the first call for bids to enable organisations to receive financial assistance for projects in line with the fund’s goals closing in May 2020.

High Level Panel of Legal Experts: an independent panel of distinguished international lawyers, focused on improving legal protections for journalists and for a free and independent media. The panel was convened by Amal Clooney and chaired by the former President of the UK Supreme Court, Lord Neuberger of Abbotsbury. It met for the first time at the Global Conference for Media Freedom, and again in December. The panel is working on producing a series of papers to provide advice to governments on legislation and other measures. The first 2 reports will be on the use of targeted sanctions to protect journalists ¹⁵, and on the creation of a visa system for states to provide safe refuge for journalists. Further papers will be published throughout 2020.

International Task Force on National Action Plans: led by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) with contributions from multilateral and regional organisations, as well as civil society, to support and engage countries in developing National Action Plans for the safety and protection of journalists. At the Global Conference for Media Freedom, the UK announced plans to develop its own domestic National Action Plan.

Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development (PRIMED) programme: the UK government announced new funding to promote media freedom in developing countries including £12 million for a consortium led by BBC Media Action to help existing media improve their business models, working in Ethiopia, Bangladesh and Sierra Leone. The programme supports media organisations to develop better business models, for example by helping them to cut production costs and find new funding streams.

In addition to the Global Conference in London, a wide range of other media freedom events took place. At the G7 Foreign Ministers’ meeting in April, Canadian Foreign Minister, Chrystia Freeland announced Canada’s partnership on the campaign and launched the High Level Panel of Legal Experts. The then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, attended and spoke at the World Press Freedom Day event in May, hosted by the Government of Ethiopia, with [UNESCO \(United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation\)](#) and the African Union. There he announced a Chevening Africa Media Freedom Fellowship for 60 African journalists.

In September, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe ([OSCE \(Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe\)](#))’s Human Dimension Implementation Meeting featured events focused on media freedom and the safety of journalists. On 2 November, the UK participated in a [UNESCO \(United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation\)](#)-led event in Mexico to mark the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists. In New York, we co-sponsored the International Press Institute’s roundtable discussion with members of the [UNGA \(UN General Assembly\)](#) Third Committee to give greater profile to the issues of attacks on, killings and intimidation of journalists. The UK also co-sponsored a side-event at the International Humanitarian Law Conference, held in Geneva in December, on the importance of protecting journalists in conflict.

Other events and conferences were held throughout the year focussing on challenges and developments in specific regions and countries. The UK made statements in multilateral fora, including the Human Rights Council, [OSCE \(Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe\)](#), Council of Europe, and the Commonwealth, encouraging partners to do more to translate collective commitments into tangible action. UK Ministers, Ambassadors and High Commissioners, and diplomatic missions lobbied privately and publicly on specific individual cases and situations of concern.

While 2019 saw further negative developments relating to media freedom in many countries, there were some signs of improvements. Overall, the number of journalists killed in 2019 fell to 56, a significant fall from previous years’ figures.

In Africa, Namibia’s rating on the World Press Freedom Index , compiled by Reporters without Borders, improved to 23rd, making it the highest ranking country in Africa. Ethiopia and Gambia also improved their ratings (up 40 and 30 places respectively). Sudan’s new Prime Minister, Abdalla Hamdok, who spoke at the launch of the Media Freedom Coalition, made a commitment to end censorship of the media, and to ensure that journalists would never again be imprisoned for doing their job. In Indonesia, the UK worked with others to defend hard won media freedoms and strengthen protection for journalists from the misuse of defamation and blasphemy laws. In May, following concerted diplomatic and public pressure, Myanmar released 2 Reuters journalists, who had been held in detention since December 2017 for reporting on alleged war crimes by the Myanmar military.

However, in some areas there continues to be serious deterioration. Some countries continue to publicly criticise the media, undermining trust in journalism, and emboldening a culture of impunity. In the Philippines, the British Embassy has continued to follow closely the case of Maria Ressa and staff have attended her court hearings. In Saudi Arabia the UK was at the forefront of the international response, engaging at the highest levels and pressing publically and privately for a credible and transparent investigation into the death of Jamal Khashoggi. And in Mexico the UK Embassy have regularly spoken out on numerous cases where journalists have been attacked and murdered, calling for justice for such attacks, particularly relating to the Miroslava Breach case.

Laws have been passed that infringe journalistic freedom and run counter to freedom of expression. Many cases relating to the murder of or attacks on journalists remained without an effective justice process. Various countries have intermittently shut down the internet or continued to resort to censorship or intimidation of the media. China, Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia continued to imprison the highest numbers of journalists globally, followed by Eritrea, Vietnam, and Iran, bringing the total number of journalists in prison worldwide to over 250. Tanzania has seen the shutdown of TV stations and the temporary suspension of the Citizen newspaper. In Venezuela, journalists have been victims of violence and arrests. Nicaragua dropped 24 points on the World Press Freedom Index, following harassment of human rights defenders and restrictions imposed on freedom of expression.

In 2019, we provided support to organisations monitoring the situation of the press in Turkey, and observed the trials of a number of journalists and human rights defenders. We also raised key issues with the Turkish authorities.

In addition to wider work supported by the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, and through the [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#)’s International Programme, we developed 20 media freedom projects across our network. Examples include:

- Sudan: a project implemented by [UNESCO \(United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation\)](#) to develop a media reform roadmap to help capacity building for journalists in countering fake news
- Peru/Bolivia: a project to help strengthen safety awareness for journalists in remote regions
- Egypt: a project training journalists on countering disinformation and fake news

The UK is determined to continue to champion media freedom. We are taking forward initiatives from the Global Conference for Media Freedom and focusing on translating the commitments made into tangible impact. We are working both through the newly formed Media Freedom Coalition and bilaterally, lobbying on new and existing cases, and working together to improve the overall media freedom environment globally.

3.4 Gender Equality

Women and girls’ rights

Promoting gender equality is fundamental to the UK’s diplomatic, development, and defence work to achieve economic growth, peace, stability, and lasting poverty reduction. The [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#)’s Special Envoy for Gender Equality, Joanna Roper, along with Regional Gender Advisers across the network, promote gender sensitive policy and programming. Through [DFID \(Department for International Development\)](#)’s Strategic Vision for Gender Equality, the UK continues to lead and invest in girls’ education, sexual and reproductive health and rights ([SRHR \(sexual and reproductive health and rights\)](#)), women’s political and economic empowerment, and ending violence against women and girls. The [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#), [DFID \(Department for International Development\)](#), Conflict, Stability and Security Fund ([CSSF \(Conflict, Stability and Security Fund\)](#)), and the Stabilisation Unit have developed a suite of guidance and training products to mainstream gender equality across the UK government’s work.

Sustained commitment is vital. In 2019, we worked with like-minded countries to defend gender equality and women’s rights. In June, the Development Minister, Baroness Sugg, called for a stand against the attempted rollback of women’s rights, and to defend and support often life-saving sexual and reproductive health services for all women and girls. We worked closely with like-minded states and civil society representatives to protect language on [SRHR \(sexual and reproductive health and rights\)](#) in international negotiations. In September, [DFID \(Department for International Development\)](#) launched a £600 million Reproductive Health Supplies programme to help 20 million women and girls access family planning, and to prevent 5 million unintended pregnancies each year up to 2025. UK support to the multi-donor challenge fund ‘AmplifyChange’ contributed to the endorsement of over 160 new grants for grassroots advocacy on [SRHR \(sexual and reproductive health and rights\)](#).

Girls’ education

Girls’ education is a priority for the UK and our Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. Access to education is a human right. However, girls are more likely than boys never to receive any type of education. Education unlocks individual potential, empowers women and benefits society as a whole, powering sustainable development. The UK’s support for twelve years of quality education for all is a key priority for the Prime Minister. Our work focuses on: improving teaching; supporting education reforms that deliver results in the classroom; and stepping up targeted support for the most marginalised.

All UK-funded education programmes have a focus on girls and young women. Between 2015 and 2019, the UK helped 5.8 million girls access a decent education. The Girls’ Education Challenge ([GEC \(Girls’ Education Challenge\)](#)) is the world’s largest global fund dedicated to girls’ education, and supports up to 1.5 million marginalised girls with access to education and learning across 17 countries.

In 2019, the UK continued to demonstrate leadership and commitment on girls’ education through our global #LeaveNoGirlBehind campaign. At the G7, the UK co-funded the Gender at the Centre Initiative, which will assist 8 African countries to ensure their education systems support the most marginalised girls. The Prime Minister also pledged an unprecedented £90 million for education in emergencies and protracted crises, supporting 600,000 children, with a third of the funding to support 100,000 children in the Sahel region and the surrounding area. Building on this, at the UN General Assembly in September, the Prime Minister also announced £515 million to help get over 12 million children – half of them girls – into school.

The Foreign Secretary continued to co-chair the Platform for Girls’ Education, an initiative launched at the 2018 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, with the aim of mobilising international support for girls’ education. In 2019, we published 2 policy papers. The first examined the state of girls’ education across the Commonwealth. The second focused on Gender Responsive Education Sector Planning. In September, Her Royal Highness The Countess of Wessex launched the second paper alongside Platform Co-Chair, former Kenyan Foreign and Education Minister, Ambassador Amina Mohamed.

The [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) funded a number of projects aimed at tackling the barriers to girls’ education. In Namibia, the ‘Stay in School Initiative’ deployed 40 volunteers to provide one to one tutorials to disadvantaged girls across 5 schools in Accounting, Science, Maths, Biology and Economics, reducing the number of girls dropping out of school due to difficulties with learning. The project also provided reading books to learners, fostering a reading culture. In Tanzania, radio programmes on girls’ education reached over one million 18-35 year olds, raising awareness, and encouraging young women to be involved in discussions that affect their lives. Since 2013, the UK’s Girls’ Education Challenge has helped over 300,000 Afghan girls attend primary school, with a second phase in 2019 supporting 70,297 marginalised girls access primary and secondary education, and skills training. [DFID \(Department for International Development\)](#) is one of the founding partners of the ‘Safe to Learn’ campaign and has provided £5 million to address violence that prevents girls from attending and learning in school. This support includes programmes in Nepal and Uganda to help strengthen and develop school systems and improve teachers’ capacity to prevent and respond to violence in schools.

Violence against women and girls

One in 3 women worldwide will experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. The UK has continued to lead global efforts to eradicate violence against women and girls in all its forms, including intimate partner violence, sexual violence, female genital mutilation (FGM (female genital mutilation)), and child, early and forced marriage. In 2019, DFID (Department for International Development) support to the UN Global Programme ‘Accelerating Action to End Child Marriage’ reached 2.97 million adolescent girls, with targeted life skills training, health care, or skills development for economic empowerment.

DFID (Department for International Development)’s £25 million flagship programme, ‘What Works to Prevent Violence’, released new evidence on the most effective interventions to drive down violence against women and girls in some of the world’s most challenging contexts, including Syria, Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Sudan. Around half of the interventions achieved significant reductions in violence, of up to 50%, demonstrating that violence is preventable. In Ghana, for example, ‘What Works’ supported community-based action teams to educate and sensitise the community on violence against women and girls, and to support survivors of violence. As a result, women in participating villages reported a 55% drop in sexual violence by their partner over 18 months, and a 50% reduction in physical violence. In November, DFID (Department for International Development) announced the next phase of the programme, which will invest up to £67.5 million to scale up proven interventions, and to conduct further research in conflict and humanitarian settings, to help stop violence against one million of the world’s poorest women and girls.

DFID (Department for International Development) support to women’s rights organisations included a £21 million contribution (for 2014 to 2020) to the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women. This included funding to support organisations working with women and girls with disabilities, who are at 4 times greater risk of violence. Despite South Africa’s advanced legislation and the funds they dedicate to this issue, the enforcement of laws and the prevention of violence remain a challenge. In South Africa, ‘What Works’ evidence informed the planning of the National Gender-based Violence and Femicide Summit ¹⁶ and has influenced the draft Gender-based Violence and Femicide National Strategic Plan ¹⁷. Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Sussex highlighted the importance and urgency of tackling gender-based violence (GBV (gender-based violence)) during her 2019 visit.

The UK continued to work with all partners to help ensure the protection of women and girls during humanitarian crises. For example, for the 2019 to 2020 financial year in DRC, the UK committed to support 820 schools to respond to GBV (gender-based violence) incidents, to establish a legal clinic for survivors, and to support 1,980 GBV (gender-based violence) survivors and 1,010 victims of conflict-related trauma through the Humanitarian Fund.

The UK demonstrated leadership on this issue at the Ending Sexual and GBV (gender-based violence) International Conference in Oslo in May, and at Women Deliver in Vancouver in June. We committed £7 million over the financial year 2019/20 to support UN Population Fund humanitarian operations within Syria. This funding will reduce the risk of GBV (gender-based violence) for those in acute need by addressing the root causes of violence. The UK continued to be the co-chair of the States and Donors working group of the Call to Action on Prevention of GBV (gender-based violence) in Emergencies, which the UK and Sweden launched in 2013.

Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI (Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative))

Rape and other forms of sexual violence are used as weapons of war to devastate communities and the lives of women, men, and children. The FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office)’s Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI (Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative)) remained a key priority. The UK led global efforts to prevent and respond to conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV (conflict-related sexual violence)), with Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon leading the Government’s efforts in his capacity as the PM’s Special Representative.

Our focus remained on the 3 objectives: to strengthen justice for survivors and hold perpetrators to account; to provide support to all survivors and children born of CRSV (conflict-related sexual violence), by ensuring access to holistic care and tackling stigma; and, to prevent CRSV (conflict-related sexual violence) by tackling its root causes. In February, over 60 experts from 23 countries attended the Wilton Park conference on strengthening justice and accountability and its recommendations have shaped our activities since.

In April, the UK played a key role in ensuring the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2467 on Sexual Violence in Conflict. We championed the inclusion of a survivor-centred approach to CRSV (conflict-related sexual violence), highlighted the need to support children born of sexual violence, and promoted specific language on using sanctions regimes to address sexual violence. But we also expressed regret that the resolution did not include language on the need for survivors of sexual violence to have access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services.

In March, Her Royal Highness The Countess of Wessex became a champion for PSVI (Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative) and Women, Peace and Security, focusing on supporting all survivors of CRSV (conflict-related sexual violence), including children born of rape; promoting women’s inclusion in peace processes, including as mediators; and supporting women building peace at grassroots level. Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon championed PSVI (Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative) on overseas visits to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH (Bosnia and Herzegovina)) and Serbia to mark the International Day to End Sexual Violence in Conflict (19

June), and with Her Royal Highness during a joint visit to Lebanon. Her Royal Highness also visited Kenya and Kosovo, to meet sexual violence survivors and highlight the need for justice. In October, the UK announced its first PSVI (Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative) Survivor Champions, Nadine Tunasi and Kolbassia Haoussou, who advocate for all CRSV (conflict-related sexual violence) survivors and help shape PSVI (Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative) survivor-centred policy and programming. We worked closely with Nobel Laureates Nadia Murad and Dr Mukwege, in particular on developing the Murad Code, a global minimum standard for the documentation of CRSV (conflict-related sexual violence), which will ensure that survivors are not re-traumatised during the process.

We supported the work of TRIAL International to increase access to justice for CRSV (conflict-related sexual violence) survivors. In BiH (Bosnia and Herzegovina), this led to the successful conviction of Saša Cvetković for the wartime rape of 2 women and a double murder in 1992. The FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) also provided financial support to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the UN Team of Experts on Sexual Violence in Conflict.

Following the successful 2018 PSVI (Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative) Film Festival, we funded capacity building for young filmmakers in Goma (DRC) in March, and brought a second group of filmmakers from around the world to London in November to help develop their own film projects, helping to amplify the voices of survivors.

The UK intends to host the PSVI (Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative) International Conference – Time for Justice: Putting Survivors First – at a time that will ensure the event has the inclusive, global impact that the issue demands. We continue to pursue those agreements and deliverables intended for the conference.

Women, Peace and Security

The UK continued to demonstrate global leadership on Women, Peace and Security (WPS (Women, Peace and Security)), through our diplomatic, defence, and development efforts as outlined in our fourth UK National Action Plan (NAP (National Action Plan)) launched in January 2018. The plan sets out how the UK will deliver its commitments under UN Security Council Resolution 1325. The UK has focused on women’s meaningful participation in peace processes. In Afghanistan, the UK advocated the meaningful involvement of women in all forums on peace. We supported the implementation of a second NAP (National Action Plan) on WPS (Women, Peace and Security) in Iraq, and commissioned a scoping study to explore how the UK’s contribution to the WPS (Women, Peace and Security) agenda in Nigeria could be strengthened.

In October, the UK actively participated in negotiations for UN Security Council Resolution 2493, led by South Africa, and successfully lobbied for references to the protection of civil society actors on WPS (Women, Peace and Security), in the face of shrinking space for women’s rights organisations. UNSCR (United Nations Security Council resolution) 2493 reaffirmed the international community’s commitment to the WPS (Women, Peace and Security) agenda in the run up to 20th anniversary of UNSCR (United Nations Security Council resolution) 1325, a landmark resolution on WPS (Women, Peace and Security). Resolution 2493 made reference to the need to support and protect civil society organisations and women peacebuilders, laying the foundation for further action to protect these groups.

The UK continued to support the Women Mediators across the Commonwealth (WMC (Women Mediators across the Commonwealth)) initiative, with 48 members from 21 Commonwealth countries building peace around the world. At the UN General Assembly, the UK supported the launch of the Global Alliance of Women Mediator Networks to amplify voices, and provide access and accountability to members. In 2019, we also supported grassroots women peacebuilders, by funding the UN Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund, as well as funding NGOs working in our NAP (National Action Plan) focus countries, through the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN (International Civil Society Action Network)) and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. In Libya, the CSSF (Conflict, Stability and Security Fund) continued to fund the Institute for War and Peace Reporting’s work to build the capacity of local partners across the country to advocate and promote women’s voices locally and on the national stage.

The UK provided £1 million in 2019/20 to the UN Elsie Initiative Fund to support the meaningful participation of uniformed women in UN peacekeeping operations. We also hosted the first meeting of the WPS (Women, Peace and Security) Chiefs of Defence Network in July, and handed over the chair to Canada and Bangladesh.

As part of her commitment to championing women peacebuilders, Her Royal Highness The Countess of Wessex attended the annual ICAN (International Civil Society Action Network) Forum of women peacebuilders held in Norway in November. The UK will continue to provide support to countries in their efforts to realise the WPS (Women, Peace and Security) agenda as we approach the 20th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in October 2020.

Sexual exploitation and abuse

The UK is committed to tackling the scourge of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and harassment by members of the peacekeeping forces, practitioners in the aid sector and across the UN system. The UK fully supports the United Nations Secretary-General’s (UNSG) victim-centred strategy and zero tolerance approach towards SEA, and the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, joined the UNSG’s Circle of Leadership on SEA in 2019.

The [CSSF \(Conflict, Stability and Security Fund\)](#) ‘Multilateral Championing our Values’ programme continues to support efforts to stamp out SEA within the UN system, providing a further \$1 million during 2018 to 2019, bringing the UK’s total contribution to \$3 million over the last 3 years. These funds support staff to deliver system-wide coordination more effectively, and to establish robust vetting and mandatory pre-deployment training and communications projects, focused on providing redress for victims. The UK also supported the UNSG Victims’ Rights Advocate, including through a contribution of £200,000 in 2019 to 2020, and will support the launch of a Victims’ Rights Statement in 2020.

In addition, we used our position on the UN Security Council to ensure that all mandates for Peacekeeping Missions contained language on the protection of women and children from SEA offences, and on accountability measures. We are committed to maintaining the momentum for reform.

The [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) deployed a senior policy advisor to provide technical and policy support to the NATO Secretary General’s Special Representative on [WPS \(Women, Peace and Security\)](#), to support the development of NATO’s first SEA policy. The policy was endorsed at the NATO Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in November. [DFID \(Department for International Development\)](#) continued to support efforts to raise safeguarding standards across the international aid sector to ensure the delivery of aid in a way that does no harm. [DFID \(Department for International Development\)](#) published 3 reports detailing progress made against the October 2018 Safeguarding Summit cross-sector commitments.

Children and Armed Conflict

The UK is deeply committed to ending the recruitment and use of child soldiers and to protecting all children in armed conflict. The UK remains the largest single financial contributor to the office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict ([CAAC \(Children and Armed Conflict\)](#)). We increased our funding to £450,000 for 2019/20, to continue assisting with the role’s core mandate. We are a member of the UN Global Coalition for Reintegration, which aims to provide long-term, sustainable funding for reintegration programmes, and we provided an additional £50,000 to fund extended research activities. We continue to be an active member of the UN Working Group on [CAAC \(Children and Armed Conflict\)](#), pressing parties listed in the UNSG’s annual report on [CAAC \(Children and Armed Conflict\)](#) to agree concrete action with the UN.

Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon represented the UK at the third Safe Schools International Conference in May to demonstrate continued UK leadership on advocacy and implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration, an intergovernmental commitment to reduce the impact of conflict upon education. In November, the UK hosted a joint Arria Formula meeting on [CAAC \(Children and Armed Conflict\)](#) with Belgium, Poland, and Peru. It explored how the international community could better support children once they are separated from armed forces and groups. The UK will be exploring how we can collaborate further with like-minded partners to maintain momentum and instigate change on this agenda.

Rights of the Child

20 November marked the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which has been driving positive change for children globally. At the UN General Assembly, the UK announced its support for the UN Voluntary Global Pledge, ‘Every Child, Every Right’, agreeing to enhance UK commitments to strengthen protection for children. The [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) is responsible for the coordination of cross-Government policy instructions for the Rights of the Child ([RoC \(Rights of the Child\)](#)) resolutions and for thematic debates within multilateral fora, such as the United Nations General Assembly ([UNGA \(UN General Assembly\)](#)) and the Human Rights Council ([HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#)). The [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) ensures that the UK’s policy position on the expansive [RoC \(Rights of the Child\)](#) portfolio is both reflected and protected at all stages of negotiations on relevant resolutions. In 2019, we coordinated instructions for the [RoC \(Rights of the Child\)](#) resolutions at the 42nd [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) and the 74th [UNGA \(UN General Assembly\)](#). We ensured consensual adoption of the strongest possible texts, in line with UK priorities and with the UNCRC. The [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) also works in close partnership with wider government on this agenda, in particular with the Department for Education, which oversees the UK’s domestic implementation of the UNCRC, and with [DFID \(Department for International Development\)](#). We continue to support and amplify cross-government efforts to ensure that children’s rights remain central to UK decision making and programming.

3.5 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights

The UK is committed to the principle of non-discrimination on all recognised grounds, including on the basis of sexual orientation and/or gender identity, affording the dignity, respect, and the rights which international human rights law offers all individuals. The UK works through international organisations, including the UN, the Commonwealth, and European institutions, to promote non-discrimination towards LGBT people, and to address discriminatory laws.

The authorities of many countries actively persecute LGBT people. Consensual same-sex relations continue to be criminalised in 69 countries, including 34 out of 53 Commonwealth countries. Even in countries where consensual same-sex relations are legal, many people still face violence and discrimination because of their sexual orientation, and/or gender identity.

The UK government is committed to supporting the legal, cultural, and social change required to make equality a reality for LGBT people the world over. In January, the Minister for Human Rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, met members of The Commonwealth Equality Network (TCEN), to hear about their work, and to

follow up on the success of the UK’s Commonwealth Summit in 2018, which saw the largest ever contingent of LGBT activists participating in a summit. At the Human Rights Council in July, the UK supported the extension of the mandate of the Independent Expert focusing on the protection against violence and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, 3 years after its first creation.

In Indonesia, UK officials worked with partners to raise concerns with Indonesian lawmakers regarding draft national legislation, which risked discriminating against minority groups. The UK worked with civil society, including young people, to ensure that minority voices were heard as the new criminal code legislation was debated by the Indonesian parliament.

We used our embassies and high commissions to monitor and raise human rights concerns and to promote the full and equal enjoyment of human rights. For example, the High Commissioner in Bandar Seri Begawan, raised concerns with the authorities before the government of Brunei introduced the final phase of the Sharia Penal Code. The then Minister for Asia, Mark Field, raised this in the House of Commons in April, stating:

This government considers it appalling that in the 21st Century people anywhere are still facing potential persecution and discrimination because of who they are and who they love.

We welcomed the Government of Brunei’s subsequent declaration to respect individual privacies, and urged it to formalise this commitment by ensuring that its laws do not discriminate on these grounds.

In June, we welcomed the decision of Botswana’s High Court to decriminalise same-sex relations. In November, we expressed our concern at Sharia court sentences handed down to 5 men for same-sex relations in Malaysia, and called for the rights of all LGBT persons to be protected.

The UK marked the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia ([IDAHOBIT \(International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia\)](#)) on 17 May, along with Pride and other local anti-discrimination events in the UK and overseas, to demonstrate publicly our commitment to LGBT human rights. Our posts around the world flew the rainbow flag, whenever judged appropriate. The 3 UK missions in Vienna (British Embassy Vienna, the UK Delegation to the [OSCE \(Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe\)](#), and the UK Mission to the International Organisations in Vienna) continued to take a leading role in the organisation of the 35-nation initiative, ‘Diplomats for Equality’. Diplomats for Equality participated in EuroPride 2019, and organised a side event at Pride Village on ‘How the International Community works together to advance LGBTI equality’. At EuroPride 2019, the initiative won a jury award for best group, which was based upon originality, message, creativity, and diverse membership. Diplomats for Equality has been replicated across the globe, and it plays an important part, through Pride marches, in demonstrating the international community’s commitment to equality and non-discrimination. The British Embassy in Baku was the only foreign mission in Azerbaijan to raise the rainbow flag on [IDAHOBIT \(International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia\)](#) in 2019. We expressed concerns that major cities in Turkey, citing security fears, banned LGBT Pride marches again in 2019.

On 14 June, the UK took over the role of co-chair of the Equal Rights Coalition (ERC ([Equal Rights Coalition](#))), in partnership with Argentina. The [ERC \(Equal Rights Coalition\)](#) is a grouping of 42 like-minded countries, working together with civil society and key stakeholders to address violence and discrimination against LGBT individuals and the continuing criminalisation of same-sex conduct. We announced our intention to deliver a new strategy to shape, guide, and re-energise the work of the [ERC \(Equal Rights Coalition\)](#).

With a core objective to increase respect for equality and non-discrimination for all, £10.6 million from the [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#)’s International Programme was allocated to support human rights projects, including those focussed on the rights of LGBT people. Through UK Aid Connect, [DFID \(Department for International Development\)](#) supported a consortium of organisations led by Hivos to promote LGBT inclusion across Africa. This £12 million 4-year programme, launched in 2018, seeks to oppose discrimination and stigma and to empower and strengthen LGBT communities.

As part of our [ERC \(Equal Rights Coalition\)](#) co-chair commitments, the UK announced our intention to host an international LGBT human rights conference. The conference would address key challenges including violence and discrimination towards LGBT people, and their continued criminalisation.

3.6 Freedom of Religion or Belief

Freedom of Religion or Belief ([FoRB \(Freedom of Religion or Belief\)](#)) was a priority for the UK in 2019. For most of the year, [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) policy on this issue was led by Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, who served as the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, and visited over 13 countries in this capacity and as [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) Minister of State. In September, Rehman Chishti MP was appointed as the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy, undertaking visits to Bahrain and The Holy See, as well as to the Netherlands for the seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process.

In 2019, there were terrorist attacks targeting people of faith, from the attack against the mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, to the Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka, and the targeting of the Poway Synagogue in the US. The UK has worked closely with all countries concerned. We are now a leading partner on New Zealand’s Christchurch

Call to Action. The then Minister of State for Security, Ben Wallace, visited Sri Lanka after the attacks there to offer UK support, and to encourage a response that would bring communities together and ensure the protection of members of minority groups.

The treatment of Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang, China, has been a priority issue. We underlined our serious concerns with China’s restrictions on religion and culture in Xinjiang, including through statements at the UN Human Rights Council ([HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#)) sessions in March, July and September, and at the UN General Assembly in September. We also raised our concerns about restrictions on wider [FoRB \(Freedom of Religion or Belief\)](#) in China, including on Christians, in the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) in March. In July, the UK and 24 other countries registered their concerns about Xinjiang in a public letter to the President of the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The UK remains deeply concerned about the persecution of Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners and other religious groups. We also continue to monitor allegations of systematic, state-sponsored organ harvesting of Falun Gong practitioners.

The UK called for the protection and fair treatment of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia, and for followers of the Baha’i faith in Iran and Yemen. We used the UN’s Universal Periodic Reviews to draw further attention to restrictions on [FoRB \(Freedom of Religion or Belief\)](#), including in Iraq, where we remained committed to working with the Government of Iraq to address issues facing Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities.

In a year that saw increasing focus on the rights of India’s minority communities, we continued to discuss with the Government of India the strength that comes from diversity and inclusion. Our project work brought together over 300 young people of different religious backgrounds for interfaith workshops and social action projects in 3 cities in India in 2019.

The situation of religious persecution in Pakistan continued to be of concern. While the Supreme Court of Pakistan upheld the acquittal in January of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman who had been accused of blasphemy, Ahmadi Muslims, Christians, and other minorities continued to suffer severe levels of discrimination and intolerance, with attacks on places of worship, including mosques and churches.

In Myanmar, there were reports of the destruction of places of worship and of forced conversions. We were concerned about laws restricting the freedom to change religion, and about the placing of arbitrary restrictions on places of worship that disproportionately affected Christians and Muslims.

In Afghanistan, religious and ethnic minority groups were regularly targeted by non-governmental groups, in particular in “Islamic State in Khorasan Province”. The rights of minority groups are legally protected in the Afghan constitution, but members of minorities continued to face widespread discrimination and insecurity in Afghan society.

The UK government increased its engagement with faith-based communities in Nigeria, where we have urged the Nigerian government at the highest level to foster social cohesion and peacebuilding.

Following joint UK, US, and Canadian efforts in Sudan, the Government of Sudan in January dropped restrictions on Christian school opening hours. On 20 November, the Sudanese Prime Minister’s Office issued a decree to allow public institutions in Sudan to accommodate the religious rites and ceremonies of non-Muslims.

Working with like-minded partners remained a priority for the UK. In May, the then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, welcomed US Secretary of State, Michael Pompeo, to the UK. During the visit, the Archbishop of Canterbury hosted a meeting with UK-based faith leaders to discuss the challenges to [FoRB \(Freedom of Religion or Belief\)](#) internationally. In July, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon represented the UK at the second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington DC. Mr Chishti represented the UK at the seventh meeting of the Istanbul Process in The Hague on combatting religiously-motivated intolerance in November, where he stressed the importance of defending the right to [FoRB \(Freedom of Religion or Belief\)](#) globally.

The UK joined 87 states to co-sponsor a UN General Assembly resolution to create a new International Day to Commemorate Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief. To mark the first International Day on 22 August, we co-sponsored a UN Arria Formula meeting in New York, where Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon delivered a statement from the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. He said:

Freedom of Religion or Belief is at the heart of what the UK stands for. We are determined to use the tools of British diplomacy in this cause, including our permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

DFID (Department for International Development)’s £12 million Freedom of Religion or Belief programme, the ‘Coalition for Religious Inequality and Development’ (CREID), is working with local partners to address stigma, social exclusion, and economic exclusion. CREID projects were launched, to counter hate speech, to promote representation of religiously marginalised women in local governance, and to create economic opportunities that foster social cohesion.

In December 2018, the then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, commissioned the Bishop of Truro to conduct an independent Review of the FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office)’s work to combat the persecution of Christians around the world. The aim of the review was to explore whether the FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office)’s response to the persecution of Christians matched the scale of the problem.

The Bishop of Truro published his final report in July, which included 22 recommendations. The government accepted the recommendations – the majority of which related to the principle of supporting FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief) for all, not just Christians – and committed to implementing them. For example, we created a new John Bunyan Fund to support FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief) projects; led cross-Whitehall efforts to mark Red Wednesday (a day dedicated to drawing attention to persecuted Christians around the world); lobbied other countries to appoint FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief) special envoys; and wrote to the British Council, Wilton Park, and Westminster Foundation for Democracy to encourage them to expand their work on FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief). Mr Chishti leads the implementation of the recommendations from this review.

3.7 Post-Holocaust issues

The Rt Hon Lord Pickles continued to serve as the UK’s Special Envoy for Post-Holocaust Issues, representing the UK at international discussions on Holocaust-related matters. He also continued to support wider international work to address anti-semitism and restitution.

In January, the FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) and the Embassy of Israel marked International Holocaust Memorial Day. Speakers included the then Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt, Lord Pickles, and Israeli Ambassador Mark Regev. During the event, the then Foreign Secretary unveiled a bust of Major Frank Foley, a former British Secret Intelligence Officer, who used his position at the British Consulate in Berlin during the Second World War to issue visas to thousands of Jews trying to escape Germany.

Following concerted UK effort to promote the importance of International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), we were delighted to welcome Australia as IHRA’s 33rd member. We worked closely with IHRA during 2019 to develop best practice guidelines on safeguarding Holocaust sites across Europe. The UK focused particularly on Alderney. Lord Pickles visited Alderney in March to discuss the importance of preserving the prison camps built and operated by Nazi Germany during its occupation of the Channel Islands.

Lord Pickles visited a number of countries including Israel, Germany, Lithuania and Romania. As Head of the UK delegation to IHRA, Lord Pickles attended the IHRA plenary meetings in Luxembourg in September and December. During these meetings, Lord Pickles worked to ensure that the UK played a key role in drafting a renewed commitment to the founding principles of the Stockholm Declaration under the auspices of the Luxembourg Chairmanship of IHRA.

In June, the UK assumed the Chairmanship of the Arolsen Archive (formerly known as the International Tracing Service), a collection of documentation from Nazi concentration camps. This important collection is still being used to reunite families in the 21st century. 2020 is a particularly significant year for Holocaust remembrance, as it marks the 75th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

3.8 Modern slavery

Modern slavery is an abhorrent human rights abuse and a crime that is prevalent around the world. According to the Global Slavery Index, 40.3 million people across the globe will be victims of modern slavery on any given day.¹⁸ The UK uses ‘modern slavery’ as an umbrella term covering the offences of slavery, servitude, forced and compulsory labour, and human trafficking.

In 2019, the UK continued to lead the fight against modern slavery internationally in line with our commitment under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals)) to eradicate Modern Slavery by 2030 (SDG 8.7). We continued to drive the issue up the international agenda, with our Call to Action to end Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking now endorsed by 90 countries. This was complemented by an increase in Overseas Development Aid spending on modern slavery to over £200 million. We continued to promote best practice through vehicles such as the public procurement principles (launched in 2018), alongside Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the US.

The FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) continued to be at the forefront of the UK’s efforts, coordinating responses across our diplomatic network in a way that complemented the efforts of other government departments. Slavery victims in the UK come from 130 countries. Our diplomatic efforts continued to be vital for developing sustainable responses to the problem of modern slavery, despite the complex and sensitive political contexts in which it thrives. The tragic deaths of 39 migrants discovered in a refrigerated lorry in Grays in October highlighted how interconnected our domestic and international efforts must be.

We strove to advance international co-operation, ensuring that governments and international agencies prioritised efforts to tackle modern slavery, share evidence about its causes and effects, and support victims. We supported states which endorsed the Call to Action to develop national action plans, and continued to encourage regular reporting through the UN University Delta 8.7 platform. We intensified the scrutiny of modern slavery risks in public and private sector supply chains, working with international partners to strengthen and harmonise

governments’ approaches. This was the focus of an international conference we co-hosted in March, where representatives from suppliers, NGOs, and governments from around the world came together to discuss modern slavery in procurement.

In May, the Independent Review of the Modern Slavery Act was published, which examined possible improvements to the UK’s legislation and its implementation. The government accepted the majority of the review’s recommendations. During a speech in June at the International Labour Conference centenary, the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, announced that in response to the review the [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) would appoint an International Migration and Modern Slavery Envoy to drive forward our work internationally. In October, Jennifer Townson took up the role.

The UK maintained a proactive multilateral presence, using membership of different organisations to advance the global will to tackle modern slavery. We supported the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons in its efforts to enhance coordination among UN agencies tackling modern slavery. We continued to support Alliance 8.7 as a platform for sharing of information and best practice, especially through the development of the Pathfinder initiative, whereby states volunteer to accelerate efforts towards achieving SDG 8.7. We regularly raised modern slavery issues when countries underwent their Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council, and, alongside Australia, led work to secure a renewed mandate for the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery.

This multilateral work ran in parallel to continuing bilateral diplomacy aimed at tackling modern slavery in country-specific forms. We undertook projects to collect better data on modern slavery in Pakistan and Latin America. Our programming promoted the rights of female migrant workers in Bangladesh, secured sustained training programmes for police in India, helped improve official responses to trafficking victims in Indonesia, Ethiopia, and Mali, and supported inter-agency coordination in Ghana. We provided anti-trafficking training for networks of religious sisters in conjunction with the Holy See, and funded campaigning in the Philippines against trafficking of children for online sexual exploitation. In Mauritius, we worked with UK retailers, NGOs, and local authorities to raise awareness of the rights of migrant workers through a ‘Know Your Rights’ campaign. In Vietnam, our programmes have focused on awareness raising and capacity building to reduce the numbers of people falling victim to criminal trafficking gangs and to support victims.

In 2020, we will continue focusing on areas where the UK can make a meaningful difference and drive further positive change. We will maintain our recognised global leadership in the fight against modern slavery, working with domestic and international partners to make the world safer and fairer.

3.9 Human rights and the private sector

Business and human rights

The UK government is committed to improving the human rights practices of businesses, both domestically and around the world, and was the first country to produce, and later update, a National Action Plan ([NAP \(National Action Plan\)](#)) in response to the UN Guiding Principles (UNGPs) on Business and Human Rights.

Domestically, a range of legislative and non-legislative measures prevent and provide remedies in respect of human rights abuses committed by businesses. Over the course of 2019, the [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy completed follow-up to recommendations made by the Joint Committee on Human Rights in its 2017 report on our progress. In accordance with the recommendation to provide more information online, details of our follow-up work can now be found on the GOV.UK website.¹⁹ The [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) continued to work closely with the UK National Contact Point, which was set up as a non-judicial state mechanism to implement the complaints process when UK businesses do not meet guidelines set by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ([OECD \(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development\)](#)).

Internationally, the UK promotes the implementation of the UNGPs through drawing up National Action Plans (NAPs). We worked with the Government of Peru, sharing UK experience and best practice in the implementation of the UNGPs and development of national-level initiatives, including supporting the inclusion of members of indigenous communities and human rights defenders in the [NAP \(National Action Plan\)](#) drafting process. Initiatives in Guatemala have raised awareness around business and human rights, including the hosting of a mock forum in partnership with the EU and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), that brought together an all-female panel of elected officials and representatives from NGOs and the private sector. In Mauritius, we partnered with the UK retail sector, NGOs, and local authorities to raise awareness of the rights of migrant workers through a ‘Know Your Rights’ campaign.

Voluntary Principles on security and human rights

The Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights (VPs) provide guidance on responsible business practice, to mining and other extractive businesses operating in high-risk and conflict-affected areas. The VPs are therefore a key tool for implementing the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). Further detail on the UK’s VPs work over the last twelve months can be found in the UK’s 2019 Voluntary Principles Annual Report.²⁰

The UK has continued to support the Security and Human Rights Implementation Mechanism (SHRIM), the multi-donor initiative created by the UK and the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) to improve the implementation of security and human rights good practices in a coherent, cost effective, and sustainable way. UK

funding supported projects: to improve human rights compliance of public and private security forces in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Kenya; to develop national private security legislation in Madagascar; and to strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations to support implementation of the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers (ICoC) in DRC. UK funding supported a review by the Government of Cameroon of its mining codes.

Private security companies

The UK is a signatory to the Montreux Document, which reaffirms the existing obligations of states under international law relating to private military and security companies’ activity during armed conflict. The UK advocates for implementation of the Montreux Document via the ICoC. The ICoC sets out principles for security providers, and related standards, governance, and oversight mechanisms. Compliance is monitored by the International Code of Conduct Association for Security Providers (ICoCA).

The UK supports ICoCA through our seat on the Governing Board. Through project funding in 2019 to 2020, we supported field assessments and outreach missions to Iraq, Kenya, Tanzania, South Sudan, Guatemala and Honduras. UK-funded guidance on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse was published by ICoCA in April.

We have worked with the UK Private Security Companies (PSCs) through the Security in Complex Environments Group to ensure that stakeholders are engaged with the government’s policy on PSCs.

Responsible sourcing of minerals

Companies involved in the mining of precious stones and high value minerals, including tin, tantalum, tungsten, and gold, known as 3TG, can generate income, prosperity, and stability for local communities. However, in conflict areas, there is a risk that some proceeds from mining may be diverted to support armed conflict and human rights abuses.

The UK continued to encourage UK importers of 3TG minerals to carry out their responsibilities based on the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High Risk Areas.

The UK supported dissemination of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) guidance through funding a capacity-building project in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, and through research to improve policy coherence between the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and the Extractives Industry Transparency Initiative.

The UK is a member of the Governing Board of the European Partnership for Responsible Minerals (EPRM), and funded development of an EPRM Knowledge Portal to support SMEs in implementing due diligence, which will launch in 2020.

The Kimberley Process

The UK remains committed to the principles and values of the Kimberley Process (KP). Since the KP’s establishment in 2003, trade in conflict diamonds has fallen from 15% of the global diamond trade to less than 1%. The EU is a KP participant and currently acts on behalf of the UK. In September, the UK hosted an Experts’ Mission as part of our application for Independent Participant status. In November, the FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) successfully secured UK independent participation in the Kimberley Process which will begin from the date at which EU law ceases to apply to the UK. Our participation in the KP enables us to take a leading role, alongside EU partners, in preventing the rough diamond industry from fuelling conflict.

Transparency and Open Government

The UK supports and promotes the values of transparency, accountability, and participation. It does this domestically through the development and delivery of policy and services, and internationally through multilateral engagement and innovative global projects.

In 2019, the UK continued to be a leader in open government and open data. Led by the UK Open Government Network, various government departments delivered joint projects with civil society organisations, aimed at creating greater transparency in both government and private industry.

The Open Government Partnership (OGP) was established in 2011 to provide an international platform for domestic reformers committed to making their governments more open, accountable, and responsive to citizens. It is a global platform to promote transparency and open government initiatives, and drives national reform through locally-led National Action Plans (NAPs) which are produced through collaboration between governments and civil society, with support from the OGP.

The UK’s work on OGP priorities continued to promote transparency. To celebrate Open Government Week in March, the UK organised a series of events with civil society partners, such as the Open Contracting Partnership, and Global Witness and Transparency International, and held the first UK workshop on Feminist Open Government, which has led to the development of a gender database.

In May, the UK launched its fourth National Action Plan (NAP (National Action Plan)) for Open Government at the OGP Summit in Ottawa. A cross-government delegation attended the forum, and announced policies on: enhancing company disclosure for payments to governments for the sale of publicly owned oil, gas, and minerals; empowering citizens to consider and facilitate impactful change through local area democracy forums; and improving the compliance with, coverage of, and quality of procurement data for publication. In addition to the NAP (National Action Plan), the UK government's Anti-Corruption Champion also launched a campaign to improve the transparency of beneficial ownership.

The UK has reinforced its commitment to Open Government by securing a position on the Bureau of the newly formed OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) Working Party on Open Government. The UK used the inaugural meeting of the Working Party group in Colombia to develop and test an Open Government Playbook, which is designed to help countries mainstream Open Government values into their decision-making processes by sharing best practice.

DFID (Department for International Development) continued to be a leading funder of the OGP. This included a £12 million programme to support open governance in Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria and Pakistan and contributions to an OGP Multi-Donor Trust Fund, hosted by the World Bank, and co-financed by France and Canada.

The UK also continued to support the OGP through projects, in partnership with the Open Knowledge Foundation, in 9 countries during the year. As part of International Open Data Day, this included projects to promote the use of open data and advocate equal development, civic participation, and government accountability in Peru, Argentina, Lesotho, Colombia, Zambia, Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya.

3.10 Death penalty and torture prevention

The UK government opposes the use of the death penalty, in all circumstances, as a matter of principle. Its use undermines human dignity, there is no conclusive evidence of its deterrent value, and any miscarriage of justice leading to its imposition is irreversible and irreparable.

In 2019, we aimed to increase the number of abolitionist countries and countries with a moratorium on death penalty use, through working with multilateral institutions and targeted bilateral interventions in priority countries.

We encouraged retentionist countries to:

- reduce the range of crimes carrying the death penalty
- move towards a moratorium on death penalty use
- stop the use of the death penalty against juvenile and vulnerable offenders
- be transparent about death penalty use, in line with international standards

According to Amnesty International's 2019 Global Report on the Death Penalty, global executions continued to decrease, falling to the lowest recorded figure of the past decade. Just twenty countries were responsible for all known executions worldwide, however, of these Saudi Arabia, Iraq, South Sudan and Yemen all saw a rise in the number of executions. China continued to execute in the thousands and remained the world's top executioner.²¹

There was some progress in 2019. In May, New Hampshire became the latest US state to abolish the death penalty, meaning that 21 states now have a de jure moratorium in place. California's Governor ordered a suspension of executions in the state in March, making California the latest state to suspend executions indefinitely through executive action. The UK was encouraged that Brunei publicly announced on 5 May for the first time that it was observing a moratorium on the use of the death penalty. This followed intense international criticism that it would enact inhumane penalties for those prosecuted under the Sharia Penal Code. The UK was at the forefront of the international community in opposing such penalties, and lobbied at the highest levels in-country. We welcomed the introduction by the Government of Malaysia of a moratorium and its commitment to abolish mandatory death sentences, and encouraged them to pass the necessary legislation without delay.

The UK remained extremely concerned about the high number of executions in Saudi Arabia, including the execution of 37 people in April. We raised these concerns with the Saudi authorities and continued to call for a reduction in the use of the death penalty, and for international minimum standards to be applied. In Pakistan, some progress was seen at the federal level to reform the Presidential Pardon process with respect to the death penalty. We remain concerned that, for 27 crimes, Pakistan retains the death penalty. The UK remained very concerned about the continued use of the death penalty in Belarus. The British Embassy in Minsk worked closely with local human rights organisations, including the Death Penalty Project and the International Commission against the Death Penalty, to lobby parliamentarians and youth groups on the need for reform.

The UK expressed regret over the executions in July of 3 people in Bahrain, which broke a 2 year hiatus from using capital punishment. Although the last execution was carried out in 2005, citizens of Zimbabwe continue to be sentenced to death. The President of Zimbabwe has publicly committed his support for abolition, and we engaged regularly with the government and parliament, in conjunction with local and international NGOs, in order to encourage abolition. The de facto authorities in Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia passed a law in April that would re-introduce the death penalty from January 2020. The UK continued to work with advocacy groups and law

makers to reform approaches to the death penalty in Indonesia, shape public debate about its use, and raise concerns over continuing cases. We urged the Government of the Philippines to reconsider moves to re-instate the death penalty. The UK continued to raise concerns over the use of the death penalty in retentionist US states.

The UK government supported several projects dedicated to abolishing the death penalty through the £10.6 million allocated to the Magna Carta Fund (part of the FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office)’s International Programme). Working with the NGO (Non Governmental Organisations) Reprieve, the FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) delivered a project campaigning for the abolition of the death penalty in Malawi and Tanzania, and supporting prisoners on death row. We also facilitated a visit by Alistair Carmichael MP, Vice Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on the Abolition of the Death Penalty, to Japan to share the UK’s path towards abolition.

The FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) worked with the NGO (Non Governmental Organisations) Death Penalty Project (DPP) in Indonesia to survey and interview opinion leaders, and to gather data and identify reasons behind the retention and administration of the death penalty. This will lead to an increased level of awareness and knowledge within government, the criminal justice system, the media, and wider public, which will in turn strengthen democratic governance and promote informed and constructive dialogue on the death penalty at a national level. This will lay the foundations for eventual reform of the death penalty in Indonesia. We also worked with the DPP in Guyana on a project with local judges and lawyers, focusing on sentencing and trial processes. This promoted the importance of ensuring the consistent application of these processes meeting international law standards.

The UK government unreservedly condemns the use of torture. Torture is an abhorrent violation of human rights and human dignity, and its impact on societies and individuals is devastating. We funded projects aimed at preventing torture, in particular to encourage states to ratify and implement the UN’s Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture.

The FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) continued to fund the Association for the Prevention of Torture (APT) to implement safeguards during the first hours of police custody in Thailand, alongside the Sub-Committee on Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearance, and to develop a stronger understanding of the importance of safeguards among the public and civil society. We welcomed the Government of Brunei’s commitment to ratifying the UN Convention against Torture and supported APT in providing technical expertise. We also funded APT to continue supporting the National Preventative Mechanism in Panama.

3.11 Overseas Security and Justice Assistance

The FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) continued work to implement the Overseas Security and Justice Assistance (OSJA) Guidance across the UK government, providing advice and training to OSJA leads in government departments. The OSJA Guidance is the government’s framework used to assess human rights risks related to our security and justice work overseas, and to identify suitable mitigation measures for those risks.

Below is an estimate of the number of OSJA cases from across government during FY 2019 to 2020:

Number of OSJA cases for financial year, 2019 to 2020	
Europe	87
Central Asia	17
Americas	72
Middle East and North Africa	197
Sub Saharan Africa	123
South Asia	79
Asia Pacific	75

3.12 Export controls

UK export licensing processes are key to ensuring responsible UK defence and security exports. All export licences are assessed on a case-by-case basis against the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria. The criteria provide a thorough risk assessment framework, and require detailed consideration of the capabilities and impact of the equipment to be licensed.

The criteria include provisions to uphold domestic policies and international obligations, such as those related to sanctions and the Arms Trade Treaty. The criteria are used to assess whether there is a clear risk that the items exported might be used for internal repression; for the commission of a serious violation of International Humanitarian Law; for the provocation or prolongation of armed conflicts, or the aggravation of existing tensions or conflicts in the country of final destination; for aggression against another country; or for asserting a territorial claim by force. These criteria apply to all types of licence applications, without distinction between civilian or military use.

During 2019, the government continued to face complex challenges in export licensing, with continuing conflicts and concern over internal repression around the globe. The government took measures to ensure that export controls for strategic items, including those covered by the EU Torture Regulations, would continue to work effectively after the UK leaves the European Union.

The UK government has one of the most transparent licensing regimes in the world. We publish quarterly and annual statistics on all export licensing decisions, including details of export licences granted, refused, and revoked. UK export licensing is accountable to Parliament, including through a statutory obligation to provide an Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls.

The Export Control Joint Unit, located within the Department for International Trade, with input from Advisory Departments, assessed 15,807 Standard Individual Export Licence applications and issued 12,088, refused 223, and revoked 11 licences during 2019.

3.13 Migration and human rights

Despite a further reduction in the overall numbers of migrants entering Europe, global migration continued to grow in 2019. Irregular migrants (those who migrate outside of legal pathways) remained vulnerable to human rights violations by states and to abuses by non-state actors. Irregular migrants are at risk of being subjected to people smuggling, modern slavery, and violations of their rights to liberty, education, asylum, and ultimately to life. These risks were highlighted in October by the deaths of 39 Vietnamese nationals in a refrigerated lorry in Grays, Essex.

The UK government remained committed to limiting irregular migration and safeguarding those who take such dangerous journeys. The UK continued to pursue a ‘whole of route’ approach, working at all stages of migratory routes in origin, transit, and destination countries, as envisaged by the UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

The UK sought to tackle both the demand for and supply of irregular migration. We supported various efforts, including economic development and conflict resolution, so that would-be migrants did not need to attempt high-risk journeys. Alongside this, through the UK’s Organised Immigration Crime Taskforce, we disrupted criminality and strengthened law enforcement capabilities in origin and transit countries.

The FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) used its diplomatic network to monitor conditions in migrant camps and detention centres. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, our Embassy raised concerns about conditions in the migrant camp at Vucjak, and in December, migrants were moved as a result of international pressure and support. In Libya, the UK raised concerns following reports of serious sexual abuse, physical abuse, and torture of migrants in detention. The then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, and the Ambassador to Libya, Martin Reynolds, also publicly condemned an airstrike in July which killed over 50 detained migrants at Tajoura detention centre, calling for the centre’s closure and the evacuation of all migrants that remained. In June, the then Prime Minister Theresa May announced that the FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) would appoint an International Migration and Modern Slavery Envoy. In October, Jennifer Townson took up the role, working to strengthen our international engagement on these issues.

In Greece, we sought to improve conditions for the most vulnerable on the island ‘hotspots’ by providing highly skilled interpreters, so that migrants could communicate with the camp authorities and gain access to vital services such as medical care and support. In response to a European Commission request, and to avoid a humanitarian crisis, the UK drew on the Conflict, Security and Stability Fund (CSSF (Conflict, Stability and Security Fund)) to increase the supply of emergency winter supplies.

CSSF (Conflict, Stability and Security Fund)-funded projects also helped Turkey support nearly 4 million refugees, including more than 800,000 girls from Syria. A new research project launched in 2019 promoted the integration of these Syrian girls into mainstream schooling through inclusive education practices.

A CSSF (Conflict, Stability and Security Fund)-funded Border Force Search and Rescue vessel continued to operate in the Aegean Sea, saving approximately 2,000 additional lives during 2019, bringing the total of those rescued to over 16,600 since May 2015.

As of December 2019, 19,353 refugees had been resettled through the Vulnerable Persons’ Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) - 4,408 in the year to December 2019. Under the VPRS, the UK has pledged to resettle 20,000 vulnerable refugees fleeing the Syrian crisis by the end of 2020. A further 1,747 children and their families had been resettled from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region under the Vulnerable Children’s Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) - 489 in the year to December 2019.

Forecasts at the end of 2019 predicted continuing high global migration flows. The UK will continue to respond to emerging migration crises and their underlying causes, in addition to building capabilities to reduce irregular migration in the longer term. Consistent with our ‘whole of route’ approach, we will continue to work bilaterally, regionally, and internationally to create safer migratory pathways that promote and protect the human rights of all.

3.14 Economic and social rights

Women’s Economic Empowerment

Women’s Economic Empowerment is essential for the full realisation of human rights and for gender equality. It is also central to achieving and sustaining inclusive economic growth. The UK’s priority areas for success are work, assets and addressing gender specific barriers to these.

The UK continued to increase economic opportunities for women through a number of [DFID \(Department for International Development\)](#)-led programmes, notably 2 programmes that were scaled-up at the UK-Africa Investment Summit:

- ‘Work and Opportunities for Women’ – which has now signed 6 partnerships with businesses (total target of 10) in support of its goal of reaching 300,000 women in global supply chains with improved working conditions
- ‘SheTrades Commonwealth’ – which provides direct support to women-owned businesses to increase their international trading power. Since its launch in 2018, the programme has provided training and mentoring to over 3,200 women-owned businesses, supported the creation of over 2,000 jobs and generated £18 million in sales for the businesses it supports

As an international champion for Women’s Economic Empowerment, the UK continued its support for the Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative, and approved £30 million of new funding for the African Development Bank’s Affirmative Finance Action for Women in Africa programme, which both supports women entrepreneurs and removes structural barriers to their full economic participation. The UK’s development finance institution (DFI), CDC, is a key supporter of the 2X Challenge. This is a commitment by the G7 DFIs to mobilise £2.3 billion (\$3 billion) in investments supporting women. During 2019, CDC led the DFI group towards agreement of harmonised definitions of gender investing. CDC has made qualifying investments that contribute £19.3 million (\$25 million) to the target.

Rights of People with Disabilities

There are an estimated one billion people with disabilities globally, with an estimated 80% of people with disabilities living in developing countries. Without including people with disabilities in our work, the international community will not eradicate poverty, deliver the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs \(Sustainable Development Goals\)](#)), or implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD).

The UK government’s vision is a world where all people with disabilities, in all stages of their lives, are engaged, empowered, and able to exercise and enjoy their rights on an equal basis with others. The Global Disability Summit: One Year On report was published in 2019 and shows that significant and concrete progress against commitments has been made. Work is underway on 74% of commitments, and 10% of commitments are reported as already completed. Specific examples of impact in 2019 include the Government of Nigeria, which enacted national legislation prohibiting discrimination based on disability, and the UN’s launch of a new Disability Inclusion Strategy, which is ground-breaking in its aim to embed sustainable and transformative progress on disability inclusion across the UN system. The UK’s Inclusive Education Initiative fund was launched in April, which will support countries to build their capacity to realise inclusive and equitable quality education.

Rights of older persons

Many older people have no reliable source of income and are much more likely to have disabilities. Work on ageing is important to the UK’s approach to the UN programme on inclusion, ‘Leave No One Behind’.

High quality disaggregated data is essential to designing and delivering effective programmes and policies that are inclusive of older people. The UK has continued to take the lead in the UN Titchfield Group on Ageing and Age Disaggregated Data. In March, [DFID \(Department for International Development\)](#) published the Inclusive Data Charter Action Plan ²², laying out the next steps it would take to understand better the situation of the poorest and most marginalised, and to make decisions that positively impact the lives of people at all ages.

The UK is also supporting governments to make vital social protection systems more inclusive of older people. For example, [DFID \(Department for International Development\)](#) continued to build on its partnership with the Government of Uganda to deliver a senior citizen grant, which now supports over 168,000 older people – including 70,000 older people with disabilities – to meet their basic needs.

Right to health

Worldwide, millions of people die from preventable causes, especially the most disadvantaged people. Countries with weak health systems are vulnerable to shocks, including outbreaks of disease. In October, the UK government announced it would step up efforts to end the preventable deaths of mothers, newborn babies and children by 2030. This is in line with our commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Achieving universal health coverage, including through strengthening health systems to provide quality affordable essential health services, and access to sexual and reproductive health and rights ([SRHR \(sexual and reproductive health and rights\)](#)), will be central to these efforts, as well as addressing the wider determinants of health such as healthy diets and healthy environments. The UK played a leadership role in ensuring that rights, including [SRHR \(sexual and reproductive health and rights\)](#), and equitable access to health services without financial hardship, were focal issues during negotiations of the Political Declaration on Universal Health Coverage (UHC) at the UN General Assembly in September. This approach was maintained through the Health Systems Strengthening Resolution at the Health and Development Policy Group in December. [DFID \(Department for International Development\)](#) continued to support countries to fulfil their UHC ambitions through bilateral and multilateral investments, in June announcing that it would contribute £1.4 billion to the Sixth Replenishment of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

The UK supported countries to strengthen health system preparedness, including the Department of Health and Social Care executive agency Public Health England’s project to strengthen the International Health Regulations, the Public Health Rapid Support Team and [DFID \(Department for International Development\)](#)’s Tackling Deadly Diseases in Africa Programme. Globally, [DFID \(Department for International Development\)](#) supported the World Health Organisation’s role in universal health coverage, health systems and emergency preparedness and response. The UK continued to invest in research, including new treatment options for drug resistant tuberculosis.

The challenge the world faces in responding to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is unprecedented and will have a profound impact on people’s enjoyment of their human rights. In 2020, countries will need to balance the demands of responding to the pandemic directly and maintaining delivery of essential health services, while also addressing the broader health, social, and economic determinants that impact on the right to the highest attainable standard of health. This is particularly important in the context of movement restrictions introduced as part of physical distancing measures to control the virus, which can have unintended consequences, including reducing access to quality essential health services. States should ensure they design physical distancing measures and adapt health services to protect access to essential health services, particularly for the most marginalised and vulnerable groups.

Water, sanitation and land

The UK recognises that the right to water and sanitation derives from the right to an adequate standard of living. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 calls for universal access to safe water and sanitation.

In financial year 2018 to 2019, the UK helped 11.5 million people gain access to water and/or sanitation. Current programming indicates that by 2020, the UK will have helped over 60 million people gain access since 2015.

In 2020, the UK will continue to support poor people in gaining access to water and sanitation in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, putting an increasing focus on strengthening national systems of service delivery, and ensuring that water and sanitation services are resilient to the effects of climate change.

Land and related social rights are addressed in the human right to own property and the entitlement to its peaceful enjoyment. Secure land and property rights also underpin the realisation of other human rights, including the right to food, water and housing.

The UK government supports good land governance as a key pillar of inclusive and sustainable economic development. Achievements include:

- strengthening tenure security of poor people through large-scale land regularisation programmes. [DFID \(Department for International Development\)](#)-funded land titling programmes have issued over 14.5 million land titles, with over half either having a woman’s name on them or a joint title between spouses
- innovative global approaches to map and pre-register land rights (i.e. in the absence of an authoritative government agency, preparing for formal registration in anticipation of there being an authoritative government agency that can, in future, finalise rights)
- improving evidence, transparency, and accountability on governance through its Land Governance for Economic Development flagship programme

Social protection

Despite good progress in recent years, social protection coverage globally remains low. Only 45% of the world’s population are covered by at least one social protection benefit, and just 18% in Africa. The UK recognises the important role which social protection plays in ensuring income security, which is essential for achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), including SDG1 to end poverty, and leave no one behind. It helps the poorest and most vulnerable to meet their basic needs, build human capital, cope better with stresses and shocks, and have more control over their lives. In 2019, the UK continued to support poor and vulnerable people to gain access to social protection in more than 20 countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, including a new programme in Liberia. [DFID \(Department for International Development\)](#) worked with partner governments to increase the reach, quality, domestic financing, and sustainability of their social protection systems, and supported safety nets in fragile and conflict-affected states to be more effective.

3.15 The Overseas Territories

Each Overseas Territory has its own constitution, government, and local laws. The UK government continued to expect the territories to abide by the same basic standards of human rights as the UK. We continued to encourage them to seek the extension of the core UN human rights conventions ratified by the UK, but to do so only when they were ready to apply them.

The UK continued to support the governments of the Overseas Territories in their commitment to ensuring the highest possible standards for the protection of children and promotion of children’s welfare. Tailored programmes of support were developed and delivered for a number of territories. These aimed to enhance the capability of key agencies (particularly police, social workers, and educators) to recognise child abuse and tackle it effectively; strengthen legal frameworks; and develop more robust systems to enable agencies to work together effectively on child safeguarding. For example, in the Turks and Caicos Islands, support to the police, social workers, and educators has helped them to enhance their capability on child safeguarding. In the Falkland Islands we supported

the police to further strengthen their investigative skills when dealing with offences relating to child sexual abuse and exploitation. We worked with Anguilla as it drafted and finalised its Child Protection Act, and are providing support for its implementation. The UK government also provided technical assistance to the Cayman Islands to enable it to review and enhance the efficiency of its Child Safeguarding Board. We will continue to provide technical support to the Overseas Territories in 2020.

The UK government is committed to equal rights, including upholding the rights of LGBT people. We believe that the strongest, safest, and most prosperous societies are those in which all citizens can live freely without fear of discrimination, and where all citizens, including LGBT people, can play a full and active part in society. At the end of 2019, 9 Overseas Territories had legal recognition and protection for same-sex relationships. Same-sex marriage is legal in the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Pitcairn Islands, St Helena, Ascension Island, and Tristan da Cunha. In November 2018, Bermuda’s Court of Appeal struck down the provision of the Domestic Partnership Act that removed same-sex marriage rights. The Bermuda Government has appealed the ruling to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. A provisional date for the hearing has been set for February 2021.

In November, the Cayman Islands Court of Appeal reversed the decision of the Grand Court that provided for same-sex marriage. The judgment tasked the Legislative Assembly to move expeditiously to provide legal recognition and protection for same-sex relationships in the Cayman Islands, which is functionally equivalent to marriage. In response, the Premier has committed to bringing legislation complying with the judgment to the Legislative Assembly during the first quarter of 2020.

In 2020, we will continue to encourage all of the Overseas Territories to work towards greater equality, and to ensure that all legislation is compliant with human rights obligations.

3.16 Human rights and democracy programmes

The UK promotes and defends a wide range of human rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in other international human rights instruments. The UK strongly encourages all states to abide by and fulfil their obligations under international law. One of the ways in which the [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) supports other countries in meeting their human rights obligations is through funding provided by the [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#)’s International Programme. We have highlighted many of our projects in the country specific sections of this report, as this work has strongly supported our human rights engagement, particularly with our human rights priority countries.

[FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) funding covers a wide geographic spread and activity in support of the [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#)’s strategic objective to project our global influence. It also helps to advance the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs \(Sustainable Development Goals\)](#)), in particular SDG5 (Gender Equality), and SDG16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) programme funding works in addition to other funding mechanisms such as the Conflict, Security, and Stability Fund ([CSSF \(Conflict, Stability and Security Fund\)](#)), as well as funding from other government departments. It enables the [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) to complement traditional diplomatic activity, respond effectively to changing international situations, and leverage funding from international partners and the private sector.

Projects funded by the International Programme in financial year, 2019 to 2020, looked at a range of human rights themes. [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) objectives in 2019 to 2020 placed a particular emphasis on:

- working closely with domestic and international partners to drive international efforts to combat modern slavery and ensure that this effort is recognised as a global moral imperative
- defending the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief for people of all faiths, beliefs, and none, and encouraging respect between different communities around the world
- supporting the right of human rights defenders to carry out their work, while being able to voice their opinions freely and safely
- promoting the development and strengthening of democracy, including through the work of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy
- opposing the death penalty and the use of torture as a matter of principle, in all circumstances
- gender equality (as detailed below)
- defending the right to freedom of the media and freedom of expression as essential components of any functioning democracy, leading to greater stability and prosperity

Gender equality: the UK government is committed to a foreign policy that consciously and consistently delivers for women and girls. For [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#)-led, projects, this has meant providing funding to support:

- the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative ([PSVI \(Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative\)](#)), which seeks to support all survivors of sexual violence in conflict, including by tackling stigma; strengthening justice and accountability; and preventing conflict-related sexual violence by tackling its root causes

- working with international partners to provide the opportunity for all girls to receive 12 years of quality education
- delivering the UK government’s National Action Plan ²³ commitments on Women, Peace and Security, including promoting women’s meaningful participation in peace processes, as well as supporting them in resolving conflict, countering violent extremism, and building peace at the grassroots level
- supporting the right for all people, irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender identity, to live with dignity, free from prejudice, violence, or discrimination

Case studies of programme work supporting human rights and democracy

In Sudan, FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) programme funding was used to train parliamentary oversight and scrutiny committees in post-legislative scrutiny. These committees in turn passed on skills, tools, and knowledge to other committees. A pioneering training centre was established to ensure sustainability and longer-term impact. The UK is now regarded as a trusted partner in terms of good governance support.

The UK’s Mission to the UN in New York partnered with NGO (Non Governmental Organisations) Article 19 to enhance multilateral understanding of and support to UN standards on Freedom of Religion or Belief, including by engaging national stakeholders in the implementation of those standards. The project supported the participation of civil society representatives from Bangladesh, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Tunisia in the 7th Istanbul Process meeting in the Hague, held on 18 to 19 November. This furthered UK objectives by ensuring that a diversity of perspectives were represented at the meeting, which focused on combatting intolerance on the basis of religion or belief.

In Vietnam, funding has supported training by Marie Collins Foundation for 400 teachers on safeguarding children in schools. Educationalists engaged actively with trainers and took learning back to their schools to create a legacy for new teachers. The project substantially raised both the profile of UK action against child abuse, and recognition of the need to adhere to international standards.

In Peru, FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) programming has supported NGO (Non Governmental Organisations) Padre Pio to open the Peruvian labour market to fleeing Venezuelan migrants. An online platform was created, matching Venezuelans with Peruvian employers. The platform, valiosos.org, is open to over 400,000 Venezuelans holding professional qualifications, bringing vulnerable migrants into the formal economy, thus combating risks of modern slavery.

4. Chapter 2: human rights and the multilateral system

4.1 Human rights at the UN

Almost 75 years ago, the UN Charter established the 3 pillars of the UN’s work: maintaining international peace and security; promoting and protecting human rights; and fostering development. As we mark the UN’s 75th anniversary, the UK’s commitment to these 3 pillars remains steadfast.

The UN is the leading international forum for the development of collective standards on human rights, scrutiny of human rights violations and abuses, and dialogue on human rights between states. The main intergovernmental forum on human rights is the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council (HRC (UN Human Rights Council)). Other important UN fora for human rights issues include the UN General Assembly (UNGA (UN General Assembly)) Third Committee, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the UN Security Council (UNSC), and the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

In 2019, the UK maintained its support for UN human rights work and was again one of the top ten donors to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), providing funding of around £8 million. This included support for projects on preventing conflict, combating sexual and gender-based violence, and specific country issues.

The UK continued to raise central human rights themes, including modern slavery, gender equality including girls’ education, the rights of LGBT people, media freedom, and freedom of religion or belief, at all relevant UN fora. We co-sponsored a number of resolutions that reinforced women’s rights and gender equality, including on girls’ education, violence against women, and discrimination against women.

Human Rights Council

The UK’s latest term on the Human Rights Council (HRC (UN Human Rights Council)) ended in December 2019 and we are standing for election in 2020 (for the 2021 to 2023 term). We are proud of our work at the HRC (UN Human Rights Council) as an active member shining a spotlight on those who violate and abuse human rights. While we will not be a member of the HRC (UN Human Rights Council) in 2020, we will continue to use our voice to support countries that are working to improve their human rights record, and to hold to account those states that violate the human rights of their people.

Our campaign pledges ²⁴ for the 2021 to 2023 term reflect UK priorities at home and overseas, draw on our tradition of supporting democratic and inclusive values, and focus on some of the most prominent challenges which the international community faces. They are:

- to promote 12 years of quality education for all girls, and to work to end violence against women and girls

- to stand up for freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief
- to support democratic values
- to be at the forefront of global efforts to protect media freedom

We remain fully engaged with efforts to strengthen the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) and to ensure that it continues to hold human rights violators to account. The UK will continue to be a strong advocate for both the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#), and the OHCHR, in promoting and protecting human rights worldwide.

Country issues

The UK continued to lead action on human rights in Syria, drafting resolutions at each [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) session, and as a member of the core group for the [UNGA \(UN General Assembly\)](#) Third Committee resolution. The March session of the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) renewed the mandate of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria for another year. The UK continued to support accountability, including through a £775,000 contribution to the UN's International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) and supported the UN Secretary-General's proposal to provide future funding for the IIIM from the UN Regular Budget. At the UNSC, we repeatedly raised concerns about violations and abuses of human rights, and about breaches of international humanitarian law, including in a session with Syrian civil society in August on the situation of detainees and missing persons.

The UK maintained the UN's focus on the serious human rights issues in Myanmar, raising these at the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#), the UNSC, and the [UNGA \(UN General Assembly\)](#). We raised concerns about human rights in both formal and informal UNSC meetings, emphasising the need for accountability, and calling on Myanmar to create conditions for the voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable return of Rohingya refugees. The UK also played an active role in the EU's co-tabling of resolutions with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) on Myanmar at the [UNGA \(UN General Assembly\)](#) and [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#), as well as in the EU-led resolution renewing the mandate of the Special Rapporteur.

The March session of the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) passed 4 resolutions under Agenda Item 7, 'Human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories'. The UK shares the international community's conviction that a 2-state solution is the only sustainable path for delivering justice and human rights for both Israelis and Palestinians. The UK supports an effective [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) as a central element of the rules-based international system that holds all to account. However, the existence of a dedicated agenda item (Item 7) which singles out Israel is disproportionate, unhelpful and harmful to the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#)'s credibility, and does little to advance the achievement of a negotiated 2-state solution. For those reasons, the UK voted against all Item 7 resolutions in 2019. We supported the tabling of a fifth resolution, on accountability, under Item 2, which allowed the UK to engage with the resolution on its merits. Ultimately the resolution failed to address the actions of non-state actors such as Hamas; the UK therefore abstained.

The UK continued to work through the UN to highlight human rights issues in Cameroon. In March we made a joint statement ²⁵ with Austria, which expressed deep concern about the deteriorating human rights situation in the north-west and south-west regions of Cameroon, and urged the Government to cooperate with the OHCHR. During UNSC briefings in June ²⁶ and December ²⁷, the UK called for investigations into all human rights violations and abuses, and stressed the need for inclusive dialogue about the root causes of the crisis in the north-west and south-west regions.

We supported EU led resolutions on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) at the March [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) and at the [UNGA \(UN General Assembly\)](#) Third Committee. The [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) resolution continued to address the most serious issues related to the dire human rights situation in the DPRK. The Third Committee resolution recognised that the DPRK had submitted its initial report on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, but also included strengthened language on civil society, and a call for stronger cooperation with humanitarian actors.

In March, the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) renewed the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on Iran. The UK is part of the core group on the [UNGA \(UN General Assembly\)](#) Third Committee resolution, and we remain concerned about limitations on freedom of religion or belief, and restrictions on freedom of expression, on the operation of the rule of law, and on women's rights.

Also in March, the UK led international consensus to renew the unique mandate of the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, with South Sudan's agreement. This enabled the Commission to continue its vital work in monitoring human rights and tackling impunity.

We were encouraged by Sri Lanka's agreement to co-sponsor a further resolution at the March [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) continuing the commitments it made to the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) in October 2015 and March 2017. We will continue to work with Sri Lanka as it implements its commitments.

At the June [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#), the UK supported a resolution on technical cooperation and assistance to Ukraine by the OHCHR. At the [UNGA \(UN General Assembly\)](#) Third Committee, as a member of the core group, the UK supported a resolution tabled by Ukraine on human rights in Crimea. The resolution condemned Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, and sought to ensure Russia's accountability for its actions there.

In September, we worked with Sudan and others on a resolution that renewed the mandate of the Independent Expert on Sudan and committed the Sudanese government to open a fully mandated OHCHR, with field offices. The adoption of the resolution, and Sudan’s willingness to engage constructively with international partners, highlighted the government’s commitment to address long-standing human rights issues during Sudan’s transition and beyond.

The September [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) passed 2 resolutions on Yemen, after efforts to negotiate a single consensus text again failed. The seriousness of the human rights situation made it vital that the Group of Eminent Experts was given further time to examine the conflict fully, and to ensure that its conclusions accurately reflect the conduct of all parties, especially the destabilising role of Iran. We are clear that the only way to end the cycle of violence is through a political settlement, which will enable a legitimate government to protect the human rights of all Yemenis.

The [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) also adopted 2 resolutions on Venezuela in September. The first strengthened the mandate of the OHCHR office in Caracas. The second, co-sponsored by the UK, established an independent international fact-finding mission (FFM) to investigate extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detentions, and torture since 2014. The Maduro regime refused to cooperate with the FFM, which established its headquarters in Panama as a result.

The UK raised concerns about the situation in China at all 3 sessions of the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#). In July, the UK and 24 other countries registered their concerns about Xinjiang in public letter ²⁸ to the President of the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) and to the High Commissioner for Human Rights. In October, the UK read a joint statement ²⁹ on behalf of 23 countries at the UN Third Committee, drawing attention to the human rights violations in Xinjiang and calling on China to uphold its obligations to respect human rights. The UK also co-sponsored events at the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) and [UNGA \(UN General Assembly\)](#), highlighting the serious human rights situation in Xinjiang and calling for China to allow UN observers unfettered access to the region.

Across the 3 [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) sessions in 2019, the UK also worked with partners to renew the mandates of (among others) the Special Rapporteurs on Eritrea and Belarus, and Independent Experts on Mali, the Central African Republic, the Kasais (in the DRC), and Somalia, as well as the Commission of Inquiry on Burundi. We also supported resolutions on the human rights situations in Nicaragua, Libya, Georgia (relating to the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia), the Philippines, and Cambodia.

Thematic issues

Throughout the year, the UK supported initiatives at the UN on gender. The June session of the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) adopted resolutions on ending discrimination against women, violence against women and girls, child and early forced marriage, and equal pay. In November, the [UNGA \(UN General Assembly\)](#) Third Committee passed resolutions on rights of the child, the girl child, migrant women workers, and the situation of women and girls in rural areas.

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights ([SRHR \(sexual and reproductive health and rights\)](#)), as well as sexual orientation and gender identity, continued to be contested topics in both the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) and [UNGA \(UN General Assembly\)](#) Third Committee. The UK co-sponsored the resolution renewing the mandate of the Independent Expert on the prevention of violence on the grounds of Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity at the June [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#), and actively worked to ensure that all amendments tabled against the resolution were defeated. We were pleased there were no procedural attempts at [UNGA \(UN General Assembly\)](#) Third Committee to target the mandate, as there had been during its creation in 2016, demonstrating progress in moving towards international consensus. On [SRHR \(sexual and reproductive health and rights\)](#), the US continued its policy of opposing references to reproductive rights, and challenged agreed understandings of gender equality, women’s empowerment, and the intersection of health and human rights. The UK worked closely with like-minded member states and civil society to protect existing language, ensuring no rollback of international agreement on these issues. We advanced related concepts in relevant negotiations, including language on supporting adolescent empowerment, improving menstrual hygiene management, and combatting discrimination against women and girls in service delivery.

The UK delivered a joint statement ³⁰ on behalf of 71 states on the issue of reprisals against civil society and human rights defenders. The statement enjoyed strong cross-regional support, and highlighted the crucial role played by civil society in the healthy functioning of democratic institutions, while reiterating the importance of being able to interact with the UN system without fear of reprisal or intimidation.

The UK again worked successfully to help secure consensus on the 2 religion-related resolutions at the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) and the [UNGA \(UN General Assembly\)](#) Third Committee: on Freedom of Religion or Belief (led by the EU), and on Combating Intolerance (led by the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation).

The UK continued to engage constructively in international discussions on ageing, including at the annual session of the Open Ended Working Group on Ageing. The UK is clear that the whole spectrum of internationally recognised human rights standards apply to older persons, as they do to all individuals, without distinction.

Universal Periodic Review

In 2019, the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) entered its third year. The UK remains a strong supporter of the UPR process and participated in all reviews (42 in total).

During Yemen’s review in January, the UK expressed concern over the human rights abuses and violations carried out by all parties to the conflict, which have resulted in civilian casualties, persecution on the grounds of religion or belief, restrictions on freedom of expression and association, restricted access to education for girls, and the continued recruitment of children to fight. At the DPRK review in May, we were clear that it was unacceptable that citizens faced surveillance, imprisonment, or even death for their religion or belief, and that the population was not allowed access to independent media or sources of information. In Iran’s review in November, the UK expressed deep concern over Iran’s failure to uphold its international legal obligations, including its arbitrary detention of citizens and foreign and dual nationals, and over discrimination against persons belonging to minority religious groups in Iran, particularly the Baha’is and Christians.

The UK will continue to promote best practice as the third cycle continues in 2020, and will participate in all upcoming reviews.

Treaty monitoring bodies and special procedures

The UK supports the work of the UN’s expert human rights mechanisms, including the treaty bodies (bodies of experts set up to monitor state compliance with their human rights treaty obligations), and special procedures (expert individuals or working groups mandated by the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) to monitor and review specific country or thematic issues). We encourage other states that have not yet done so to commit to accepting all visit requests. We expect mandate holders to operate within the terms of their mandate and to respect the code of conduct set out in [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) resolution 5/2.

Appointment of International Human Rights Ambassador

In May, the then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, appointed Rita French to be the UK’s first International Ambassador for Human Rights, demonstrating the UK’s strong commitment to defend and advance human rights globally. She is based at the UK Mission to the UN in Geneva, and is also the UK’s Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

The International Ambassador for Human Rights has 3 main objectives: to enhance the UK’s profile and leadership within the multilateral system, including at the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#); to work with other countries to support and advance human rights; and to promote the UK’s priority human rights campaigns. She engages with civil society groups in Geneva, the UK, and around the world.

In 2019, the International Ambassador for Human Rights undertook visits to Sierra Leone, The Gambia, Senegal and Mozambique, where she engaged in human rights dialogue with representatives of governments, institutions, and civil society in order to assess progress and challenges, and to explore targeted UK interventions to support states’ progress on human rights, including recommendations in the Universal Periodic Reviews.

Security Council

The UK is committed to supporting the United Nation’s work. In the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 2019, the UK continued to lead diplomatic efforts to tackle a number of long-running conflicts that have had a damaging impact on human rights. The UK acted as ‘penholder’ in the UNSC on Central Africa, Colombia, Cyprus, Iraq/Kuwait, the Lake Chad Basin Libya, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan (together with Germany), Yemen, the Protection of Civilians, and Women Peace & Security ([UNSCR \(United Nations Security Council resolution\) 1325](#)). We have continued to press for discussions at the UNSC on serious human rights violations where these constitute a concern for international peace and security.

UN reform

Formal implementation of Secretary-General António Guterres’ UN reform agenda began on 1 January, and has delivered positive changes to the UN development system, peace and security architecture, and management structures and processes. This important agenda is improving the UN’s effectiveness, and is ultimately supporting its mission to help the world’s most vulnerable people. The UK has been a strong supporter of reform, both politically and financially, and we have continued to work with the UN and our other international partners to ensure greater focus on conflict prevention, peacebuilding, better coordination across the UN system, and mainstreaming human rights considerations across the wider UN system.

Responsibility to Protect and mass atrocity prevention

The UK is committed to the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which places the clear onus on states to protect their populations from war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and ethnic cleansing. R2P is a political commitment adopted by all member states at the 2005 World Summit, to support states in this vital endeavour. Our work to promote R2P includes programmes that deliver security, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and stability activity, to help countries become safer and more secure. In 2019, we continued to work with our international partners to drive policy at the UN, playing a leading role on Myanmar, Libya, Syria and Yemen in the UNSC.

The UK participated actively in international fora that advocated for R2P and the sharing of best practice to drive up standards and levels of protection. We hosted an international event in April dedicated to improving capacity to prevent atrocity crimes, which also involved UK civil society groups active in this field. The UK also continued to fund the work of both the joint UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, and the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect.

Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding remains a critical tool in both conflict prevention and post-conflict environments, where building stronger and more inclusive societies based on human rights and respect for the rule of law can prevent a relapse into violent conflict. The UK continued to provide political and financial support to UN peacebuilding efforts and to the implementation of the Secretary-General’s Sustaining Peace agenda.

We provided targeted support to boost the UN’s conflict prevention capacity, and pushed for the UN to make better use of its broad range of stability tools. These include more effective UN Special Political Missions, UN Country Teams, UN Policing, UN Peacekeeping, increased mediation capacity, and a strengthened Women, Peace and Security agenda. We have also worked with UN Resident Coordinators and host country governments (including Liberia and Sudan) to assist government peacebuilding efforts and transitions from UN peacekeeping to peacebuilding. Our support (through the UN Development Programme and others) to strengthen national rule of law and human rights institutions in fragile and conflict-affected situations is a critical contribution to UN peacebuilding. Through our support to the UN Peace and Development Advisers programme, we have helped build human rights metrics into national early warning systems for conflict prevention.

Peacekeeping

UN peacekeeping is one of the key tools available to the international community in holding the line on global conflicts and creating the necessary conditions for peace. The impact of war falls primarily on civilians, particularly women and children.

There are 13 UN peacekeeping missions with around 100,000 military, police, and civilian personnel, with 6 large missions, chiefly in sub-Saharan Africa. As a permanent member of the UNSC, the UK continued to work to ensure that protecting civilians and reducing the threat of human rights violations and abuses formed a core element of all peacekeeping operations where this risk was present. In 2019, we conducted strategic assessment visits to 5 UN peacekeeping missions where we engaged with staff, civil society and international partners to assess the human rights situation on the ground and the role of the mission in improving this.

The UK worked closely with the UN and member states to reform UN peacekeeping, focusing on the ‘3Ps’:

1. better mission Planning
2. more and better Pledges of personnel and equipment
3. stronger mission Performance

This supports the UN Secretary-General’s Action for Peacekeeping agenda.

UK partnerships training for police and troop contributing countries complies with human rights standards. We announced a £1 million contribution to the Elsie Fund to increase the number of uniformed women in peacekeeping, creating a more inclusive future for peace operations, and committed to undertaking a gender barrier assessments study to ensure the UK continues to meet UN targets on women’s participation. Our voluntary funding of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment System enhanced mission planning and decision-making, improving accountability.

4.2 Commonwealth

The Commonwealth continued to be an important forum for the protection, promotion, and strengthening of democracy, human rights, good governance, and the rule of law. As Chair-in-Office of the Commonwealth, the UK continued to work with the 3 pillars of the Commonwealth – the Commonwealth Secretariat, its member states, and its organisations and networks – to deliver on the commitments made at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) which the UK hosted in London in 2018. This work supports the values and aspirations of the Commonwealth Charter, which are essential for the development of peaceful, just, and inclusive Commonwealth societies.

Human rights institutions

At CHOGM 2018, Heads of Government recognised the importance of sharing human rights best practice and expertise across the Commonwealth. The UK has supported delivery of these commitments by funding the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in its role as chair of the Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions (CFNHRI), and by sharing best practice between Commonwealth National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs). In partnership with the Secretariat for Pacific Communities (SPC), the UK also provided support for Pacific Commonwealth countries to establish and strengthen NHRIs, and deliver on international human rights commitments. Following UK-funded regional dialogues, the Solomon Islands established a new body within government to focus on the promotion and protection of human rights, and Kiribati and Samoa ratified the UN Convention Against Torture.

Recognising the importance of ensuring that the voices of the smallest and most vulnerable countries are heard in international fora, Heads of Government also agreed at CHOGM 2018 to strengthen the Commonwealth Small States Office (CSSO) in Geneva. To enable Commonwealth small states to participate effectively and constructively in Geneva-based international human rights mechanisms, the UK funded 2 resident human rights advisers in the CSSO to provide technical assistance to Commonwealth small states in their engagement with the Human Rights

Council. This support has particularly helped member states’ participation in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) reporting system, with countries such as Dominica and Grenada receiving tailored technical assistance on their UPRs. The UK’s International Ambassador for Human Rights, Rita French, facilitated greater Commonwealth cooperation in Geneva by hosting briefings for Commonwealth member states ahead of the 42nd Session of the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) in September.

Social and political inclusion

In support of effective, accountable, and inclusive national institutions, the UK-funded Commonwealth Partnership for Democracy (CP4D) hosted a panel session at the UN High Level Political Forum in July to promote the Commonwealth Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures, a best practice tool to improve parliaments’ capacity to measure performance against Sustainable Development Goal indicators. The UK also provided funding to enable the Commonwealth Secretariat to conduct 6 additional election observation exercises, to improve democratic processes in Commonwealth countries.

Bearing in mind that 34 of 53 Commonwealth member states criminalise consensual same-sex relationships, the UK has continued to offer support to any Commonwealth country wishing to reform outdated legislation that discriminates on the grounds of sex, gender identity, and/or sexual orientation. Using UK funding, the Equality and Justice Alliance (EJA) – a consortium of civil society organisations – worked across the Commonwealth to create a fairer, more equal, and more inclusive Commonwealth for women and girls and for LGBT people. The EJA provided technical assistance to 6 countries, to support the reform and repeal of discriminatory colonial-era legislation.

The role of the Commonwealth

The then [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) Minister, Harriett Baldwin, and Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon represented the UK at meetings of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) in June and September respectively. CMAG received updates from the Commonwealth Secretary-General on developments in member states, and recognised the important work of the Commonwealth’s organisations in advancing the fundamental political values of the Commonwealth. In November, the Secretary-General undertook a tripartite visit with the African Union (AU) and the Francophonie to Cameroon, in order to encourage ongoing national efforts to support peace-building and national cohesion. CMAG, in conjunction with the Good Offices of the Commonwealth Secretary-General, plays a fundamental role in championing the values and principles of the Commonwealth Charter.

4.3 Europe

European Union

As an EU member in 2019, the UK helped shape and deliver the EU’s human rights and democracy objectives within the EU, and across several institutions including the UN, Council of Europe (CoE), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe ([OSCE \(Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe\)](#)).

At the UN Human Rights Council ([HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#)), the UK worked with EU partners to influence resolutions on the most egregious human rights violations. The UK helped develop the EU Item 4 statement (concerning developments that require the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#)’s attention) on several human rights situations, including those in Myanmar, DPRK, Iran, South Sudan, Syria and Burundi, and the Item 2 Resolution on Eritrea. The UK also worked collaboratively and creatively to support EU thematic priorities, including freedom of peaceful assembly and association, human rights defenders, violence and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, freedom of religion or belief, rights of the child, and women’s rights and gender equality.

The UK supported EU preparations for key Human Rights Dialogues with China, Colombia and Egypt; supported the adoption in July of an EU Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security; and in October supported the adoption of EU Council Conclusions on Democracy. In September, the UK worked with other member states to extend EU sanctions against Venezuela, as a response to continuing serious human rights violations during the unfolding crisis. The UK also worked to develop the EU’s response to the human rights violations taking place in Xinjiang in China, and widespread threats to civil society in Russia.

The UK hosted a number of human rights events in Brussels on themes including human rights violations in Syria, and advancing media freedom.

The UK offered expertise to help advance and support the proposed EU global human rights sanctions regime. This sanctions regime could lead to travel bans and asset freezes, and would aim to address serious human rights violations or abuses anywhere in the world.

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe ([OSCE \(Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe\)](#)) provides a forum for dialogue between 57 participating states, including on human rights. The UK passed the Chairmanship of the Human Dimension Committee to the Czech Republic in 2019.

The UK worked with like-minded partners in the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) to raise human rights concerns, including on freedom of religion or belief. The UK was also instrumental in generating a number of statements on human rights at the weekly OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) Permanent Council. The UK Ambassador to the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), Neil Bush, took over as Chairperson of an OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) Gender Engagement network in July, and has worked to: promote better gender equality at all levels in the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe); ensure a zero tolerance policy and approach to sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment; and raise the importance of full and effective women’s participation in areas of conflict prevention, mediation and resolution. This included preventing sexual violence in conflict zones in OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) countries. Initiatives have included workshops, work with the Female Ambassadors and Women in the First Dimension, including on key recruitment questions, and tangible steps on gender parity in politico-military meetings and activities, together with the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) Gender Section.

The UK continued to provide support to the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe)’s autonomous institutions, and worked closely with the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) Representative on Freedom of the Media at the Global Conference for Media Freedom in London in July.

In September, the UK was active during the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe)’s annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) in Warsaw, the largest human rights meeting in Europe. The UK delivered 7 national statements, and 2 on behalf of the EU and its member states. The UK and Canada organised an event on legal safety of journalists, and co-organised an event on digital safety of journalists with other members of the Group of Friends on Safety of Journalists. The UK also delivered a statement, on behalf of the 16 invoking states, on the 2018 Moscow Mechanism report on human rights violations in Chechnya, as well as co-organising an event on this with speakers from the region.

Regrettably, states were unable to agree any new human dimension decisions at the December Ministerial Council. However, the UK was one of 46 states to make a joint statement on human rights at the Ministerial Council.

Following our departure from the EU, protecting and promoting human rights will remain an essential aim of our foreign policy. Our approach will be shaped by our commitment to strengthen international human rights protections and the rules-based international system. We will continue to champion global causes, and collaborate with like-minded partners across Europe. We will use our membership of the CoE and OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) as important platforms to amplify these principles, helping us advance our work on human rights, democracy, security, and the rule of law across Europe.

Council of Europe

The UK is a founder member of the Council of Europe (CoE) and one of 5 major financial contributors (€33 million in 2019). The UK used its membership to pursue international human rights, democracy, and rule of law objectives.

The UK was proactive in the CoE’s Governance and Democracy Committee, which assisted member States, including Ukraine, Slovakia and Lithuania, with governance reforms. On Gypsy, Roma and Traveller policy, the UK played a leading role, sharing good practice with member states, including on combating hate crime.

UK expertise contributed to education policies to tackle Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity-based violence in the education sector. The UK is Chair of the CoE’s Gender Equality Commission.

Members of the UK’s delegation to the CoE’s Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) participated in PACE election observation missions in Ukraine and Belarus. Members of the UK delegation to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities played a leading role in local election observations in Turkey.

During a visit to Strasbourg in April, the then Attorney General, the Rt Hon Geoffrey Cox QC MP, underscored the UK’s firm commitment to the CoE. In May, Tim Otty QC and Murray Hunt were appointed as the UK’s independent experts on the Venice Commission, the CoE advisory body in the field of constitutional law.

Also in May, the Committee of Ministers (CM), the intergovernmental decision-making body of the CoE, met in Helsinki for its annual ministerial level meeting. The then Justice Minister, Edward Argar, reaffirmed the UK’s commitment to the CoE, and successfully embedded modern slavery as a CoE priority. The UK attaches great importance to this issue. The UK’s Permanent Representative to the CoE, Christopher Yvon, was Vice Chair of the Committee of States Parties concerned with Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. The UK also has a seat on the CoE’s Group of Experts on Action Against Trafficking (GRETA), which monitors compliance with the Convention.

In June, Russia’s delegation returned to PACE, having been absent since the Assembly imposed sanctions on the country in response to the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In the CM, the UK’s Permanent Representative to the CoE called on Russia to commit to all CoE values, abide by its rules, and meet its obligations as a member state. By the end of 2019, Russia had paid its outstanding CoE ordinary budget contributions, with the exception of interest owed.

In September, Marija Pejčinović Burić (former Croatian Minister for Foreign Affairs) succeeded Thorbjørn Jagland as Secretary General of the CoE. The then Minister for Europe and the Americas, Christopher Pincher, affirmed the UK’s continued commitment to this important human rights institution in a call to Secretary General Burić on her first day in office.

The CoE commemorated its 70th Anniversary throughout 2019 – the anniversary has particular significance for the UK as the Treaty establishing the CoE was signed at St James’s Palace in London on 5 May 1949.

In the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), the number of cases against the UK which went to a judgment by the Court, and the number of judgments that found violations, remained low (5 judgments, each of which found violations). The Court’s ongoing caseload increased to 59,813 cases pending at the end of 2019, of which ongoing cases brought against the UK fell to 111. The UK continued to advocate reform of the Court, to allow it to concentrate on the most important cases before it.

4.4 International criminal justice

Supporting international criminal justice continues to be a fundamental element of the UK’s foreign policy. Impunity for the most serious of crimes must not become the default, and those deemed responsible should be held to account. International justice is also important for forging reconciliation, by giving a voice to the victims of atrocities, and by helping promote lasting peace and stability, as well as by deterring future crimes.

The UK strongly supports the role of the International Criminal Court (ICC), the world’s first permanent international criminal court with jurisdiction over the most serious crimes of international concern. It is a court of last resort, allowing accountability when national authorities are unwilling or unable to do so. The UK provided both practical and financial support to the Court, contributing £10.2 million and working with the Court on sentence enforcement.

However, the UK also believes that the Court must improve its performance, and to that end, along with other parties to the Rome Statute, we have been at the forefront of an ambitious reform programme. This includes establishing an Independent Expert Review, with a remit to make recommendations to improve the governance of the Court, the working methods of the judiciary, and the process of investigations and prosecutions. The review will publish its findings and recommendations in September 2020. The UK has also nominated Judge Joanna Korner QC as a candidate for the judicial elections to be held in December 2020.

A notable ICC verdict was the conviction of Bosco Ntaganda, a rebel leader from the Democratic Republic of Congo, found guilty of 18 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Significantly, this was the first ICC conviction for crimes that included sexual violence and sexual slavery. Ntaganda was sentenced to 30 years’ imprisonment. However, 2 defendants from the Ivory Coast, Gbagbo and Blé Goudé were acquitted; the Prosecutor is appealing these verdicts.

At the end of 2019, the ICC authorised the Prosecutor to proceed with an investigation into the situation surrounding the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh as there is a reasonable basis to believe crimes against humanity resulting from deportation across the Myanmar/Bangladesh border, and of persecution on grounds of ethnicity and/or religion against the Rohingya population may have been committed.

The UK also welcomed the operationalisation of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM). By gathering and preserving evidence of atrocities, the IIMM ensures that genuine accountability remains possible. The UK welcomed the 2019 reports of the UN Fact Finding Mission on Myanmar, which found that crimes against humanity and war crimes had been committed by the Myanmar military against the Rohingya.

The International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT) continued with its mandate of fulfilling the residual functions of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. The tribunal concluded the high-profile appeal case concerning Radovan Karadzic, whose original 40-year jail term for committing genocide during the Balkans conflict was extended to life imprisonment. The IRMCT also continued to hear the retrial in the case of Stanisic and Simatovic, which the tribunal aims to complete by the end of 2020. The Mladic case is also expected to be concluded and the appeal judgement delivered during 2020. The UK also continued its support for the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), including a contribution of £225,000, and for the Residual Special Court for Sierra Leone (RSCSL).

The UK has been at the forefront of international efforts to gather and analyse evidence of atrocities committed in the Middle East, including contributions to the UN International Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) to support the preparation of legal cases for serious crimes committed in Syria since March 2011. Similarly, the UK supports the work of the UN Team for the Accountability of Daesh (UNITAD). The team is collecting preserving, and storing evidence of Daesh crimes in Iraq. The UK has contributed more than £1 million to the operation of the team, and has announced a further £1 million to support the team’s work throughout 2020.

4.5 Sanctions

Sanctions, such as arms embargoes, asset freezes, and travel bans, are one of the tools the UK uses, in coordination with the UN and EU, to defend and promote human rights and democracy. Sanctions aim to coerce a change in unacceptable behaviour, constrain behaviour through limiting access to resources, or communicate a clear signal of

disapproval. To ensure that sanctions are legally robust and effective in delivering our policies, the UK promotes a ‘Smarter Sanctions’ policy, ensuring maximum impact on sanctions targets while minimising unintended consequences such as humanitarian suffering.

In 2019, the UK worked with EU partners to address the expropriation of land by the Assad regime in Syria, so that refugees and displaced persons would still be able to return to land that they owned. In the first set of designations of this kind under the EU Syria sanctions regime, we imposed carefully targeted sanctions on 11 businessmen and 5 entities who were supporting and benefiting from the Assad regime’s expropriation and development of land. These measures sent a clear signal to the Assad regime and private investors that land development had to respect Syrians’ property rights.

The UK also supported EU efforts to extend sanctions under the Venezuela sanctions regime in September. The EU-wide asset freeze and travel ban was applied to a further 7 individuals in response to continuing serious human rights violations, including torture, committed by elements of the Venezuelan security and intelligence forces in support of the Maduro regime.

In October, the EU adopted a sanctions regime in response to the deteriorating political and social situation in Nicaragua, including the repression of political opponents, demonstrators, independent media and civil society organisations by security forces and pro-government armed groups since April 2018. These sanctions allowed for travel bans and asset freezes against people or entities responsible for human rights violations or abuses, for the repression of civil society and democratic opposition, and for those undermining democracy and the rule of law in Nicaragua. No designations were made in 2019.

To demonstrate the UK’s global leadership, and to further our commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights, in July 2019 the UK announced plans to bring forward legislation to implement a UK autonomous global human rights sanctions regime. A UK human rights sanctions regime will help to deter and provide accountability for serious human rights violations and abuses anywhere in the world. The government is introducing the legislation during 2020.

5. Chapter 3: consular assistance

Consular services are at the heart of the [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#)’s objective to ‘Protect our People’. Our commitment to assist British people, living, travelling, and working around the world, includes standing up for British citizens overseas by providing high quality, accessible consular services globally, focused on those most in need.

In 2019, the UK provided professional, non-judgemental assistance in 22,421 new, and 7,225 ongoing cases, irrespective of gender, race, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, marital status, disability, and religion or belief. We lobbied against the imposition of the death penalty and judicial corporal punishment, raised allegations of torture and mistreatment, and intervened to support those facing discrimination or other human rights violations. We supported over 5,300 people detained overseas, and provided information and advice in over 1,350 potential cases of forced marriage. We continued to support those bereaved through murder and manslaughter overseas, and in March, HRH The Duke of Sussex unveiled a memorial in Birmingham to the 31 British people killed in terrorist attacks in Bardo and Sousse in 2015.

As part of our commitment to continuous improvement, we reviewed our support in complex consular cases; to victims of forced marriage; and to victims of murder and manslaughter. As a result of the review, we increased training for [FCO \(Foreign & Commonwealth Office\)](#) staff on fair trial issues; ensured no forced marriage victim had to take a loan to pay for repatriation; and increased our funding for victim support services, including for those bereaved overseas in suspicious circumstances.

In 2020, we will continue to focus on the most vulnerable. This will include considering how we can further improve support for those bereaved overseas, following recommendations made in October by the Victims’ Commissioner for England and Wales and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Deaths Abroad and Consular Services.

5.1 Death penalty

As of December 2019, 14 British nationals faced the death penalty worldwide. Over 40 more were detained on charges which could attract the death penalty if the defendants were found guilty.

The UK opposes the use of the death penalty, and judicial corporal punishment, in all circumstances. If a British national is sentenced to death, or is facing a charge that carries the death penalty, we will normally intervene, with their consent, at whatever stage and level is deemed most effective to prevent their execution. We work closely with legal teams engaged by British nationals facing the death penalty, and are helped in this work by Reprieve and the Death Penalty Project (DPP), 2 NGOs that provide legal assistance and advice.

5.2 Torture and mistreatment

The UK takes all allegations of torture and mistreatment affecting British nationals extremely seriously. In 2019, we continued to train and advise our staff on relevant international obligations, and on the appropriate action to take when receiving an allegation of torture or mistreatment. Our overriding priority in such cases is to ensure the safety of the person involved: consular staff will avoid any action that might increase the risk to the person concerned, or to

any other person who may be affected. If the person is detained or in hospital, our support could include increasing the frequency of our visits, assisting the individual to gain access to medical treatment, or considering support for a transfer to another wing or facility.

Although we cannot ourselves formally investigate torture or mistreatment allegations overseas, with the individual’s permission we can raise them with the local authorities, demanding an end to the mistreatment and investigation of the incident, in line with international standards. In addition, we hold periodic reviews of all such cases to identify regional trends, and develop strategies to engage and lobby the local authorities. In December, we reviewed a total of 124 open cases. Between January and December, British nationals reported 119 new allegations of torture or mistreatment overseas to consular staff.

We also considered how we could help improve countries’ compliance with their obligations to prevent and combat torture and mistreatment. For example, in Pakistan we worked to influence decision-makers and public opinion against torture and mistreatment, through engagement with local government and civil society organisations.

5.3 Overseas detainees

In addition to taking action on specific human rights violations, we aim to support the welfare of all British nationals in detention overseas who request consular assistance, particularly where there may be concerns about local conditions or the standard of trials. As of December, the FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) was supporting 2,193 British nationals in detention overseas (including those in police custody, in immigration detention, on remand, and sentenced prisoners).

In March, the then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, exercised his right to grant diplomatic protection to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, detained in Iran since April 2016. This raised the case to a state-to-state issue and was an important diplomatic step to draw attention to the internationally wrongful acts of the Government of Iran. We continued to lobby the Iranian authorities to grant consular access to all British citizens detained in Iran, and hosted an event on 25 September at the UN General Assembly examining Iran’s judicial practices.

We work in close partnership with, and part fund, Prisoners Abroad, an NGO (Non Governmental Organisations) that offers practical and emotional support to British detainees overseas and to their families in the UK. In 2019, we worked together on over 1,000 cases, particularly those involving vulnerable detainees. The then Minister for Consular Services, Andrew Stephenson MP, hosted the annual FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) Prisoners Abroad reception in November, to recognise all those who support this work, including volunteers, donors, staff, as well as former service users and their families.

5.4 Forced marriage

The UK remains a world leader in the fight to tackle forced marriage, with the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU (Forced Marriage Unit)), a joint FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) and Home Office Unit, leading efforts to combat the practice at home and abroad. In 2019, the FMU (Forced Marriage Unit) provided advice or support related to a possible forced marriage in over 1,350 cases relating to over 60 countries.

The FMU (Forced Marriage Unit) also delivered outreach and training events in the UK to a wide range of agencies, schools, and communities, including a series of workshops developed for frontline police officers. Through these events, we aimed to raise awareness, and to help professionals recognise the warning signs and take the right action to protect children and adults. FMU (Forced Marriage Unit) staff also took part in ‘Operation Limelight’, a joint Border Force and police operation, to raise awareness at UK ports and airports of the risks of forced marriage.

In terms of international work, in March the UK co-hosted a consular cooperative initiative in Kenya to share best practice on cases linked to Somalia. This brought together a range of countries including the Netherlands, Canada, Norway, the US, Denmark, Sweden, Hungary, Austria, and Ireland, as well as international organisations and NGOs such as the UNHCR and UNICEF. The UK shared information on our training programmes for police and social care leads, our communication campaign at UK airports and social media campaigns, and the use of forced marriage protection orders and FGM (female genital mutilation) protection orders. FMU (Forced Marriage Unit) staff have also attended and hosted outreach events in Pakistan and Norway, working with civil society actors, journalists, and local authorities, to share best practice and raise awareness.

The UK continued to fund NGOs, based both overseas and in the UK, to provide refuge for those at risk abroad and to support repatriated victims of forced marriage. In 2019, we also initiated prevention workshops across 3 different districts in Pakistan, helping to encourage dialogue in communities around the issue of forced marriage and consent.

6. Chapter 4: human rights priority countries

6.1 Afghanistan

There remain fundamental challenges to the protection of human rights in Afghanistan. Legal provisions and government commitments to protect human rights exist, but implementation and further progress is constrained by: ongoing conflict, lack of institutional capacity, Taliban control over large parts of the country, and societal conservatism.

Afghanistan endures as the most lethal ongoing conflict in the world, with more civilian casualties than any other country. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) recorded 10,392 civilian casualties in the first 9 months of 2019 ³¹. Anti-government elements – predominantly the Taliban and Islamic State Khorosan Province (ISKP) – caused the majority (62%) of civilian casualties. Women and children represented 42% of all civilian casualties during this period, with the number of child casualties 11% higher than last year. The UK continues to advocate for a reduction in current levels of violence, and urges all sides to abide by international humanitarian law. Our contribution to the non-combat NATO mission includes training to increase professionalisation and prevent conflict-related human rights violations within the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces.

On 28 September, Afghans voted in presidential elections against a difficult security backdrop. Attacks in the period around the presidential elections led to 458 civilian casualties, with 277 civilians killed or injured on polling day itself. There was also a notable pattern of abductions, intimidation, and harassment carried out by the Taliban against civilians before and during the elections, that curtailed the political rights of many and contributed to the lowest ever turnout for an Afghan election.

The Afghan Government took positive steps to address torture and ill-treatment in places of detention, as was recognised in a UNAMA report in April, which documented a reduction in torture for conflict-related detainees ³². But the report did find continuing high rates – with almost one in 3 conflict-related detainees providing credible accounts of being subject to torture and ill treatment – highlighting that further action is needed to eliminate the practice.

Afghanistan is ranked the second worst country in the world for women’s well-being ³³. Gender-based violence remains widespread and victims’ access to justice is limited. The UK funds a programme focused on improving the health sector response to gender-based violence, to ensure that victims have access to adequate services. In the second half of 2019, this programme provided services to over 3,000 women, and trained over 200 gender-based violence psychosocial counsellors and over 200 health service providers.

The widening of girls’ access to education in Afghanistan is a major success of the past 18 years, but a large gap persists between the experience of boys and girls. This disparity affects female employment; women make up only a fifth of Afghanistan’s labour force, though attitudes towards women’s workforce inclusion are changing, with 76% of Afghans supporting women working outside the home, compared with 29% of Afghans 10 years ago ³⁴. Since 2013, the UK’s Girls’ Education Challenge has helped over 300,000 Afghan girls attend primary school, with a second phase in 2019 supporting 70,297 marginalised girls access primary and secondary education and skills training.

Sexual abuse against children remains a critical problem and social taboo makes remedying this challenging. Laws exist to ban cultural practices such as bacha bazi, a practice whereby men exploit boys for social and sexual entertainment, but so far there have been no prosecutions. A recent scandal involving the large-scale sexual abuse of boys at school brought the question of child sexual abuse into the spotlight. Parliament is trying to pass laws to prevent girls under 18 from marrying, but changing societal attitudes may be far harder.

The rights of all religious groups are legally protected in the Afghan Constitution, and the government has attempted to ensure their inclusion in policy-making processes. Many religious and ethnic minorities – such as Sikhs, Hindus, and Hazara Shia Muslims – continue to face widespread discrimination and insecurity. The insecurity faced by the Hazara community was made stark in August when Islamic State Khorasan Province conducted an attack against a Shia wedding, leading to 92 civilian deaths, and over 180 people injured. The British Embassy in Kabul maintains strong relationships with representatives of these communities and engages with them regularly. For example, the British Ambassador to Afghanistan met the sole Sikh MP in Afghanistan and a range of young leaders within the Hazara community, to mark International Religious Freedom Day. Such engagement helps us to stay updated about their concerns and signals the UK’s support for the rights of members of religious minorities.

The Afghan media remained diverse and notably independent in 2019. However, Afghanistan still ranks extremely low at only 121 on the World Press Freedom Index ³⁵, largely because of the insecurity faced by journalists operating in the country. Supporting media freedom in Afghanistan was a priority for the UK in 2019; we committed £250,000 to projects enhancing journalist safety, supporting female journalists, and widening access to information.

Given that the ongoing conflict remains the greatest barrier to improving human rights in Afghanistan, steps taken to move closer to a peace process in 2019 represented positive developments. However, there is widespread concern over how human rights will be safeguarded in any peace process with the Taliban. The UK continues to emphasise the importance of protecting the progress made on human rights in any peace settlement, and has been actively pressing for the views of women and minorities to be represented in all stages of a negotiation. We funded the Secretariat of Afghanistan’s High Peace Council, in which women constituted 26% of its workforce. The UK’s Gender Strategy for Afghanistan prioritises women’s inclusion and participation across all our work, and as active members of the Women Peace and Security (WPS (Women, Peace and Security)) working group (a group of donors, governments, civil society and development agencies), we are working to provide technical assistance towards the implementation of Afghanistan’s National Action Plan on WPS (Women, Peace and Security).

6.2 Bahrain

The main human rights concerns in 2019 were restrictions on freedom of expression, the application of the death penalty, and the revocation of citizenship. However, there was progress in other areas, notably active investigations by the human rights oversight bodies into allegations of violations, continued respect for freedom of religion or belief, and action on modern slavery and human trafficking.

Bahrain dropped one place in the World Press Freedom Index, to 167 (out of 180), as restrictions on freedom of expression remained, and self-censorship by the media, particularly on social media, continued. We are monitoring draft amendments to the existing press law, which should offer greater protection for journalists, although the law may not cover social media content. The UK will continue to raise specific cases of concern, including that of activist Nabeel Rajab, urging Bahrain to uphold its international commitments including the protection of freedom of expression and its obligations under the UN Convention Against Torture. The first female Chairperson of the Bahrain Journalist Association, Ahdeya Ahmed, attended the Global Conference for Media Freedom in London, an encouraging sign for future NGO (Non Governmental Organisations) engagement in 2020.

The death penalty remained a punishment for certain crimes. In July, 3 people were executed, including 2 for the murder of a police officer. These were the first executions carried out since 2017. The Minister for Human Rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon made representations to the Bahraini authorities’ prior to the executions; released a statement on 27 July; and raised the matter at the UN Human Rights Council, reiterating the UK’s firm opposition to the death penalty and long-standing policy to oppose capital sentences in all circumstances.

Allegations of human rights violations of detainees, forced confessions, and unfair trials continued. During 2019, the UK worked with Bahrain’s independent human rights oversight bodies, the first such organisations to be established in the region, to develop effective mechanisms to safeguard human rights in these and other cases. While the UK recognises that challenges remain, notable progress was made during 2019. The oversight bodies investigated all allegations put to them, and made their findings public where possible, including through the annual Ombudsman report. Investigations into allegations of abuse also resulted in the prosecution of over 90 police officers, with at least 6 convictions. We continued to encourage and welcome swift and thorough investigations. An investigation jointly conducted by the Ministry of Interior Ombudsman and Special Investigations Unit, resulted in retrials of the capital cases of Muhammad Ramadan and Hussein Moosa.

The use of deprivation of nationality, when it renders an individual stateless, remained a concern. While recognising that Bahrain is not a signatory to the 1954 and 1961 UN Conventions on Statelessness, and so is not bound by their provisions, the UK nevertheless continued to make its concerns clear. The UK welcomed HM King Hamad’s decision in April to restore the Bahraini nationality of 551 individuals.

For the second year in a row, Bahrain was the only country in its region to achieve Tier 1 status in the US Department of State Trafficking in Persons Report. Building on this success, Bahrain presented its approach to modern slavery with regional partners by hosting in October the first Government Forum to Combat Trafficking in Persons in the Middle East – a forum, which plans to reconvene elsewhere in the region.

Bahrain maintained a positive record on freedom of religion or belief. The creation of the King Hamad Centre for Peaceful Co-existence and the work, which the centre undertook continued to give prominence to Bahrain’s approach, both regionally and further afield. Bahrain welcomed visits by the Bishop of Truro’s office and by the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Rehman Chishti MP. The engagement provided opportunities for constructive discussions with religious leaders from all faiths represented in Bahrain, with opportunities to visit different places of worship, including a Shia husseiniya.

Bahrain successfully implemented new legislation allowing for alternatives to detention for some criminal offences. Over 1,500 individuals benefitted from this change. Further advances to the judicial system are underway, with the newly proposed ‘Child Restorative Justice and Protection from Abuse Law’ in process. This positive step was reinforced by a decree issued by HM King Hamad to release 80 convicted juveniles from rehabilitation centres, replacing their remaining jail terms with non-custodial penalties.

Bahrain continued to welcome UK support to help advance its reform agenda. The then Minister of State for the Middle East, Dr Andrew Murrison, co-chaired the biannual UK-Bahrain Joint Working Group in London in October, which reiterated a commitment to the continued provision of UK expertise in support of Bahraini-led reform initiatives. Working together in this way offers the best opportunity to see the positive and constructive changes that the Government of Bahrain has committed to implement.

6.3 Bangladesh

There was no improvement in the overall human rights situation in Bangladesh in 2019. The ruling Awami League and its allies returned to power in December 2018, winning 96% of parliamentary seats. The elections were marred by reports of intimidation and vote rigging. In January, the EU called on the authorities to ensure a proper examination of allegations of election irregularities.

Reports of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and attacks on journalists and others continued during the year. The number of death sentences issued increased, and at least 2 executions were carried out. Throughout the year, UK ministers met opposition politicians, media representatives, and indigenous leaders, and in April the then Minister for Asia, Mark Field, raised human rights concerns with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

According to Amnesty International ²⁶, former Prime Minister and leader of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Khaleda Zia, imprisoned since February 2018 on corruption charges, was not receiving adequate health care ²⁷.

Under the 2018 Digital Security Act (DSA), 42 people were arrested, often on charges of hurting religious sentiment, or undermining law and order. The provisions of the DSA were criticised as empowering the government to arrest and detain journalists, human rights activists, and political opponents. In April, Bangladesh dropped 4 places to 150 (out of 180) in the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index; its lowest ever position.

In July, Bangladesh submitted its initial country report to the UN Committee Against Torture on measures it had taken to uphold its commitments under the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT). Bangladesh's engagement with the Committee, the first time since its accession to UNCAT in 1998, was welcomed. The Committee raised a number of concerns, including allegations of the widespread and routine commission of torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement officials, and the absence of statistical data on the implementation of the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act.

During the UN Committee Against Torture's review, the Government of Bangladesh stressed that it had promoted the gradual replacement of the death penalty by other forms of punishment, although had not taken any steps to abolish the death penalty. Two executions were carried out, one for the murder of a Saudi diplomat. In 2019, 327 death sentences were issued in Bangladesh (compared to 319 in 2018). In November, 6 of the 7 people convicted over the Holey Bakery terrorist attack in 2016 received death sentences.

Violence by organisations associated with political parties continued throughout 2019. In October, a student from the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology was beaten to death by members of the student wing of the Awami League, allegedly for posting material online which was critical of the government.

Gender based violence remained a concern, highlighted by the murder of Nusrat Jahan Rafi, a female madrassah student who complained to the police about harassment by her principal. Women habitually are harassed in public, making travelling on foot or public transport difficult.

Bangladesh continued to play a vital role in hosting a significant number of the Rohingya people, the world's largest population of stateless people displaced by the actions of the Tatmadaw (the Myanmar army). Bangladesh maintained its commitment to the voluntary, safe, and dignified return of the Rohingyas to Myanmar. There were reports of significant criminality in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, where approximately 855,000 Rohingya refugees are living. These included murder (around 30 cases), gender-based violence, abduction, illegal drug trading, and human trafficking. The government introduced additional police stations, fences around the camps, and limited night-time patrols by mixed security forces. In September, the government introduced restrictions on access to the internet in the camps, citing security concerns following a peaceful rally in the Kutupalong camp on 25 August, a number of violent incidents and increased tension with host communities.

To help manage the protracted Rohingya crisis, the UK committed an additional £117 million, delivered through UN agencies and NGOs, prioritising the protection of rights, including essential documentation, child protection, anti-trafficking measures, case management for survivors of abuse and exploitation, and legal assistance services. The total UK commitment since August 2017 stood at £256 million. The UK supported Bangladesh and other partners to enable the presence of Rohingya refugees at the International Court of Justice hearings on Myanmar in December.

More broadly in Bangladesh, UK programme funds supported projects addressing human rights priorities including: modern slavery (female migrant workers' rights); democratic governance (indigenous people's inclusion); freedom of expression (research on the DSA and digital advocacy); and media freedom.

6.4 Burundi

The main human rights violations in Burundi in 2019 concerned enforced disappearances and extra-judicial killings, sexual violence, and restrictions on media freedom, democratic space, and freedom of expression.

Members of the ruling party's youth league, the Imbonerakure, were identified by international observers, including the UN and NGOs, as being the main perpetrators of violations and abuses. The Burundian National Intelligence Service (SNR) and the police also frequently perpetrated human rights violations. ²⁸

The Government of Burundi did not tolerate any criticism of the ruling party, creating an environment where freedom of expression was absent. The SNR and Imbonerakure conducted widespread surveillance of citizens. Individuals expressing an opinion at variance with that of the ruling party were frequently harassed, attacked, and sometimes killed. ²⁹ Women and girls whose family members had not joined the ruling party, or who opposed it, were subjected to sexual violence; the most common form being gang rape. This often occurred in front of family members, who were then subject to death threats if they reported the rape. With the judiciary's lack of independence and an absence of accountability for the perpetrators, violations and abuses continued unchecked. This contributed to a general climate of fear, and resulted in increased self-censorship.

Although some opposition parties were able to register in advance of the 2020 elections in 2019, democratic space remained tightly controlled. The National Congress for Freedom, the main opposition party, had at least ten of their offices burnt down by Imbonerakure in politically motivated attacks. Political opposition figures and civil society critics were systematically targeted by state authorities and the Imbonerakure.

Arbitrary arrest and detention on political grounds continued. One high-profile case was the arrest, detention, and permanent expulsion from school of 2 schoolgirls for drawing on the late President Nkurunziza’s portrait in their school books. Arrests and detentions were carried out by security forces and the Imbonerakure, working in conjunction with the police and SNR. Torture while in detention in Burundi occurred regularly and included sexual violence.⁴⁰

In 2017, the ruling party announced a voluntary levy to be paid by citizens to help fund the 2020 election. In 2019, the levy continued to be used as a justification by local authorities and Imbonerakure to extort, threaten, punish, and coerce individuals into handing over currency, goods, or services. Receipts were often not provided, resulting in individuals having to pay the levy multiple times over, sometimes up to 25 times the original levy.⁴¹ There was no record of how much had been collected or how the levy was being spent, raising concerns over corruption and misuse.⁴²

Respect for media freedom in Burundi deteriorated in 2019. Media workers were frequently subjected to harassment and arrest. In October, 4 journalists were arrested for reporting on a security incident⁴³ and held by the security agencies in conditions that constituted cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment.⁴⁴ The operating environment for the media was further constrained by additional restrictions introduced by the National Independent Electoral Commission ahead of the May 2020 presidential elections, which banned any reporting on provisional election results and on opinion polls.

Same-sex relationships remain illegal in Burundi under Article 567 of the 2009 Penal Code and are punishable with a fine and up to 2 years’ imprisonment.

In 2019, the UK provided funding for human rights projects in Burundi. This included: training and educating police officers on appropriate investigation and interrogation techniques; support for the country’s independent newspaper IWACU; and assistance to build local human rights networks.

The UK raised the human rights situation in Burundi in multilateral fora. We called on the UN Security Council (UNSC) to remain focussed on solving the crisis in Burundi and to ensure that the situation remained on the agenda. The UK supported the extension of the mandate of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi at the UN Human Rights Council ([HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#)), ensuring continued in-depth monitoring of human rights violations in the country. Given the worsening human rights environment in Burundi, the European Union countries and the UK did not provide direct financial support to the Government of Burundi under Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement.

6.5 Central African Republic

The human rights situation in the Central African Republic (CAR) fluctuated throughout 2019. The UN Independent Expert on human rights in the CAR noted that a decrease in human rights violations and abuses during the first half of the year was likely to be due in part to the signing of a peace agreement on 6 February 2019 between the Government of CAR and 14 armed groups. This led to a reduction in the number of violent confrontations between rival groups and consequently of attacks on the civilian population. Despite this, CAR remained one of the most lawless countries in central Africa and its poor human rights record was exacerbated by armed groups operating with impunity. Serious human rights violations and abuses continued, including conflict-related sexual violence, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, arbitrary arrests and executions, looting and destruction of property, denial of humanitarian access, female genital mutilation, and the recruitment and use of children by armed groups.

CAR once again ranked second from the bottom on the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2019 Human Development Index⁴⁵. According to the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), CAR is also one of the most dangerous countries in the world for humanitarian agencies to operate in⁴⁶. While the UK welcomed the inclusion of children and armed conflict issues in the peace agreement, we remained concerned by the continued recruitment of children by armed groups in CAR. During a UN Security Council consultation, the UK called for CAR to adhere to all child protection provisions in the peace agreement, including those related to the release and reintegration of children from armed groups.

On 30 July, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Sexual Violence in Conflict (SRSG SVC), Pramila Patten, highlighted that there had been almost total impunity for sexual violence in CAR since 2016. Women and girls were often raped, gang raped, or forced into sexual slavery or marriage. SRSG Patten stressed that accountability for sexual violence must not be negotiated away as the price of peace. In November, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) released a report on the challenges faced by sexual violence survivors in accessing services in Bangui, the capital city. MSF’s recommendations included ensuring that access to urgent treatment and care for survivors extended beyond the prefectures considered ‘crisis zones’⁴⁷, including for the high number of internally displaced individuals situated in Bangui who require urgent assistance.

In September, during the 42nd session of the Human Rights Council, the UK participated in an Interactive Dialogue with the UN Independent Expert. The UK welcomed the establishment of transitional justice institutions and the launch of the consultations of the Truth, Justice, Compensation and Reconciliation Commission. The UK and international partners urged the CAR government to continue to prioritise efforts to strengthen the judicial system in order to hold perpetrators of human rights abuses and violations to account.

6.6 China

The human rights situation in China has continued to deteriorate significantly and consistently since 2018. China continued to place restrictions on expression of religious belief, ethnic minorities, the media and wider freedom of expression, as well as detaining and harassing human rights defenders, and restricting the space for civil society to operate. The authorities’ use of arbitrary detention continued, as did a lack of judicial transparency and due process, particularly in cases deemed ‘politically sensitive’.

In Xinjiang, credible estimates indicate that over 1 million Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities have been extra-judicially detained in internment camps across the region. Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang continued to suffer systematic restrictions on their culture, language, and religious activity. An invasive and indiscriminate surveillance apparatus also remained in place. Credible reports of forced labour increased, especially in the cotton industry. In November, high-profile leaks provided further evidence of the coercive nature of the ‘political re-education’ programme. The Chinese authorities continued their efforts to present the measures in Xinjiang as legitimate and necessary to combat extremism and terrorism.

In October, the UK read a joint statement on behalf of 23 countries at the UN General Assembly Third Committee drawing attention to the human rights violations in Xinjiang, and calling on China to uphold its obligations to respect human rights. The UK also co-sponsored side events at the UN Human Rights Council and General Assembly raising concerns about the serious human rights situation in Xinjiang and calling for China to allow UN observers unfettered access to the region. The UK also raised concerns about the situation in China at all 3 sessions of the Human Rights Council. In July, the UK and 24 other countries registered their concerns about Xinjiang in a public letter to the President of the UN Human Rights Council and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

There continued to be major restrictions on the ability to practise religion freely throughout China, and the UK remained deeply concerned about the persecution of Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners, and others. In Xinjiang, British diplomats saw evidence of mosques being demolished and permanently closed as well as of the removal of Islamic architectural features, such as domes and crescents, in an effort to “sinicise” Islam. There were credible reports of the closure and demolishing of unregistered churches across China. In December, Pastor Wang Yi of the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu – one of China’s largest house churches until it was forcibly closed in December 2018 – was tried in secret and sentenced to 9 years in prison on charges of inciting subversion.

Restrictions targeted at ethnic minorities continued in the Tibet Autonomous Region and other Tibetan areas. British diplomats visited Tibet in July – the first time a request to visit has been accepted since the British Ambassador visited in 2017. They raised concerns about religious freedom in Tibet and the case of Gedhun Choekyui Nyima, the Dalai Lama’s choice of Panchen Lama, who remains missing.

There was no improvement with regard to freedom of expression in 2019. China is the world’s biggest jailer of journalists, with at least 60 currently imprisoned. Reporters without Borders ranked China 177th out of 180 countries in their 2019 Press Freedom Ranking. In July, the then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, hosted the Global Conference for Media Freedom, where he highlighted the case of citizen journalist and rights activist Huang Qi, who was sentenced to 12 years in prison for ‘leaking state secrets’. Increasing numbers of international media outlets were subject to blocking and censorship. Academic freedoms were further restricted, with academics losing their positions because of comments deemed critical of the authorities. Internationally, the Chinese authorities continued to attempt to prevent critical discussion of issues it deemed ‘sensitive’.

Civil society and human rights defenders continued to come under pressure. Many activists were detained, particularly in the run-up to the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests and the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. These included activists working across a range of issues, including human rights, gender, labour, and freedom of expression. Four years on from the ‘709 Crackdown’, lawyers remained under pressure: human rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang was sentenced to 4 and a half years in prison in January for ‘subverting state power’ and there were reports that lawyer Yu Wensheng was tried in secret in May. The UK raised both cases with Chinese authorities in 2019. The whereabouts and status of dual Swedish-Chinese national Gui Minhai remained unknown after his detention and disappearance in 2018 (which followed his earlier detention and disappearance in 2015). NGOs focused on LGBT rights and freedoms in China continued to face pressure, and LGBT content in media continued to be censored.

British diplomats maintained regular contact with human rights defenders and continued to attempt to attend their trials, but were denied access and subjected to harassment. We worked to promote human rights in China through our project work, and regularly raised human rights concerns with the Chinese authorities. The Chinese authorities’ suspension of the UK-China Human Rights Dialogue (last held in 2017) continued.

The Chinese authorities continued to detain Chinese and foreign nationals arbitrarily, often with political motivation. Widespread reports of torture (including deaths in detention) and lack of due process or access to legal counsel in cases deemed ‘politically sensitive’ remained concerning. A former worker in the British Consulate General Hong Kong, Simon Cheng, was detained and subjected to mistreatment, which amounted to torture, while on a business trip to mainland China. China is estimated to continue to execute more people every year than the rest of the world combined, although the actual figure remains a state secret.

The police response to widespread protests in Hong Kong was concerning. Aggressive tactics were used, including frequent use of tear gas, rubber bullets and occasional live rounds. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concerns over the firing of tear gas in enclosed areas and at individual protesters, and urged

the authorities to investigate these incidents immediately. A hard-core minority of protesters used violence, which included the launching of projectiles and petrol bombs at police, and vandalising property. A detailed analysis on Hong Kong is published separately in the UK government’s 6-monthly reports to Parliament ⁴⁸.

The UK used public statements to call for a robust, independent inquiry into events in Hong Kong. The UK supports the right to peaceful and lawful protests. The Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, made clear that the police response to protests needed to be proportionate, whilst also consistently stating that violence by protesters was unacceptable.

6.7 Colombia

In 2019, the protection of human rights in Colombia was hampered by the country’s continued struggle to ensure peace, 3 years after the government signed an historic agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The situation of the country’s human rights defenders (HRDs) remained a particular concern, and despite minor improvements in the conviction rate, the level of violence against HRDs continued to be worryingly high.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that 107 HRDs were killed in 2019, compared to 110 in 2018. While each attack was a product of its local context, the violence was particularly concentrated in areas with high levels of multidimensional poverty, where organised criminal armed groups were fighting for control of illicit economies following the withdrawal of the FARC, and where the state has little presence. The Cauca region saw the most HRDs killed, approximately 30. A disproportionate number of indigenous leaders were caught up in the violence, as different armed groups disputed local coca cultivation and drug trafficking routes.

The Colombian government reiterated its commitment to protecting HRDs, and there were some advances. Impunity fell, albeit from a high level, helped by the improved capacity of the Attorney General’s special unit that investigates violent attacks against HRDs. It reported convictions in 20% of the cases it investigated in 2018, up from 14% in 2016. However, the overwhelming majority of convictions are of those who carried out the attacks (usually hired hitmen), rather than of those who ordered them, making it difficult to break the cycle of violence.

October’s regional elections were the most violent for at least 10 years, with 22 candidates killed ⁴⁹. The murder of Karina Garcia – a candidate for mayor of Suárez in Cauca – along with 5 others on 1 September shocked the country. Although election day itself was peaceful, the government confirmed that its National Protection Unit had been supporting over 1,100 candidates deemed under threat.

The UK directly supported around 450 at-risk HRDs in 2019, through training to improve protection and security, as well as legal support to fight impunity in cases of attacks. More widely, as part of our package of support to the peace deal, the UK helped strengthen the capacity of the Attorney General’s Office, including the special unit that deals specifically with attacks on HRDs. We have also provided support to environmental and land-rights defenders, and helped strengthen the Ombudsman’s early warning system and institutional follow-up mechanisms.

The full implementation of the peace deal with the FARC remains the country’s best hope for improving the security of social leaders, including HRDs, especially the formally established pillars 1 (integrated rural reform) and 4 (substitution of illicit crops) of the agreement. Despite the government’s overall commitment to the peace deal, it is in these 2 areas where implementation is the slowest, because of budget constraints, vested interests, and the reality on the ground. The latest UNODC figures indicate that coca cultivation fell slightly in 2018, according to the UNODC. However, productivity increases (some farmers report being able to harvest their coca bushes more than 5 times a year) mean cocaine production, and therefore illicit financing, were at historic highs.

In 2019, the UK continued to provide support to help Colombia address the legacy of sexual violence from its 53-year internal conflict. Over the past 3 years, UK support to La Red de Mujeres Víctimas y Profesionales, a network of survivors of sexual violence, has helped document 1,200 new cases, which are now before the transitional justice system. Gender-based violence remains a serious problem in Colombian society. The UK funded work to train rural medical professionals in how to attend cases of sexual violence, including with a view to preserving evidence to encourage convictions.

In 2019, Colombia ranked 129th out of 180 in the Reporters without Borders Media Freedom Index, with the main threats being violence and self-censorship. During nationwide protests that followed the 21 November national strike, the Colombian Press Freedom Foundation reported 27 attacks on members of the press. They included 22 by security forces, amid widespread criticism from civil society organisations of excessive use of force. In 2019, the UK provided financial support to the Press Freedom Foundation, supporting efforts to train journalists in self-protection mechanisms. In the run-up to October’s regional elections, we helped broker a pact in which 9 political parties undertook publicly not to spread disinformation.

6.8 Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK)

There was no improvement in the dire human rights situation in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 2019. The regime continued to exert control over nearly every aspect of citizens’ lives: they were told what to believe, what to consume, and where they could travel. Those who defied the state could face imprisonment or even death.

The DPRK Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, expression, speech, the press, demonstration, and association. In reality, DPRK citizens did not enjoy any of these freedoms. The DPRK remained top of Open Doors’ annual ranking of the 50 countries where Christians experience extreme persecution, and came 179th out of 180 in the Reporters without Borders World Press Freedom Index.

The DPRK authorities continued to deny allegations of human rights violations and to refuse human rights practitioners access to the country. They continued to refuse to co-operate with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights or with the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in North Korea, Tomás Ojea Quintana. The regime continued to refuse to act on the 2014 UN Commission of Inquiry report, which had highlighted wide ranging and ongoing ‘‘crimes against humanity’’.

In May, Korea Future Initiative released a report entitled ‘Sex Slaves: The Prostitution, Cybersex and Forced Marriage of North Korean Women and Girls in China’. The report gave detailed accounts of women and girls being trafficked from the DPRK to China for prostitution and forced marriage, and the misery and suffering they endured.

In October, the UN Special Rapporteur reported to the UNGA (UN General Assembly) Human Rights Committee, focusing on food insecurity and on the ongoing suppression of basic freedoms. The UN estimates that 10.9 million people in North Korea are undernourished.

Throughout 2019, the UK continued to raise and challenge the DPRK’s human rights record in multilateral fora. The UK was a main sponsor, through the EU, of resolutions on the situation of human rights in the DPRK adopted by the UN Human Rights Council and UN Third Committee in March and November respectively. Both resolutions recalled the DPRK’s responsibility to protect its population from crimes against humanity, and urged the DPRK to cooperate fully with the UN Special Rapporteur by giving him unrestricted access to the country. At the UN General Assembly in October, we called on the Government of the DPRK to show the world that freedoms supposedly enshrined in its Constitution were not a mirage.

The DPRK’s third Universal Periodic Review took place in May. The UK used the session as an opportunity to call on the DPRK to end its use of forced labour; accede to the Convention against Torture; and end all surveillance and censorship contrary to international human rights laws and standards. The DPRK did not, however, respond specifically to the UK’s advance questions or statement during the session, and confirmed to the UN Human Rights Council in September that it did not support our recommendations but had taken note of them instead.

We played a prominent role in enforcing UN Security Council sanctions on the DPRK in 2019. Under UN Security Council Resolution 2397, all UN member states were required to repatriate all North Korean nationals earning income in their jurisdiction by 22 December. Such workers were forced overseas to earn money for the regime, and often worked in conditions tantamount to slavery in their host country. The UK was at the forefront of international lobbying on this issue, and urged all member states to take seriously their obligation to repatriate DPRK overseas workers so that this exploitation could come to an end. We also played a prominent role in examining the implementation reports submitted to the UN as part of this obligation.

The UK continued to use its bilateral relationship to engage with the DPRK government on its human rights record. Throughout 2019, the Ambassador and other Embassy officials raised human rights in meetings with DPRK officials in Pyongyang, while FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) officials used meetings in London with DPRK embassy officials to do the same. Officials encouraged incremental change where they saw opportunities.

6.9 Democratic Republic of Congo

The UN Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO), which monitors human rights violations in DRC, reported a worsening of the human rights situation in conflict affected areas in 2019. Human rights violations and abuses included sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), arbitrary arrest and detention, and extrajudicial killings. UNJHRO reported that the number of abuses attributed to members of armed groups and militias had increased; whilst those committed by state agents had reduced. However, state agents remained the main perpetrators, committing 54% of documented violations.

Armed groups and militias continued to target and attack civilians indiscriminately. UNJHRO reported an increase in violations and abuses in conflict-affected areas in 2019, including a 32% increase in extrajudicial killings committed by members of armed groups. The UK has supported long-term stability and peacebuilding in eastern DRC through our contributions to the UN peacekeeping mission MONUSCO (approximately £50 million in financial year 2019 to 2020) and the provision of staff officers. The UK used its UN Security Council role to ensure that the protection of civilians was central to the 2019 MONUSCO mandate renewal, alongside a renewed focus on disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration efforts. In 2019 UK Aid continued to contribute to the DRC Stabilisation Coherence Fund as part of the UK’s 6-year £70 million programme focussed on building stability in the east, together with other international partners, including through mediation for local communities affected by violence.

SGBV perpetrated by state agents and armed groups significantly increased in 2019. UNJHRO reported 1,054 adult victims of conflict-related sexual violence in 2019, compared with 650 in 2018. Members of armed groups were responsible for 69% of the abuses during the year. The UK welcomed the International Criminal Court’s unanimous conviction in July of militia leader Bosco Ntaganda for war crimes and crimes against humanity, including crimes of sexual violence. The UK worked with international partners to secure stronger reference to gender issues and the prevention of sexual violence in conflict in the 2019 MONUSCO mandate renewal. The UK also funded a military

Gender Advisor to MONUSCO. The UK funded Trial International to secure greater accountability for cases of sexual violence, to build local capacity to document, investigate, and litigate in sexual violence cases effectively. In one of the cases in question, support resulted in the conviction of two armed group combatants for war crimes, enabling more than 100 victims to receive compensation. The UK also funded a project for young filmmakers to raise awareness of sexual violence in conflict and combat social stigma. Other UK-funded programmes supported gender-based violence survivors, including providing free legal assistance to 269 victims of international crimes. Education and health programmes funded by the UK continued to support 820 schools to respond to incidents of gender-based violence, and to provide post-exposure prophylaxis kits to survivors of sexual violence. The UK also supported the Mukwege Foundation in setting up a survivors’ assistance fund.

There were some improvements to civil and political rights in 2019. UNJHRO reported 778 violations (a 26% decrease compared to 2018), including arbitrary detention and freedom of opinion and expression. The reduction has largely been associated with President Tshisekedi’s focus on improving political space, respect for freedom of speech, announcements of the release of 700 political prisoners (although poor records make this difficult to verify), and permission for senior opposition figures to return to DRC. Despite these improvements, concerns remained, including the harassment of political opponents, journalists, and human rights defenders. Several local opposition radio stations had their licences suspended in 2019. The UK funded a programme with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy to build the capacity of the DRC parliament and to improve evidence-based law making and democratic accountability. The UK also funded a local NGO (Non Governmental Organisations) to improve the monitoring of violations of press freedom. We continued to work with international partners to put pressure on the DRC Government to improve political space, confirm the release of political prisoners, recognise citizens’ right to protest peacefully, and refrain from using excessive force against protestors.

In May, the UK pushed for improved DRC engagement in multilateral human rights institutions, in particular as the DRC was a member of the Human Rights Council. During the DRC’s Universal Periodic Review the UK made recommendations on media freedom, improving justice, and the Forced Labour Convention. Following UK lobbying, the DRC accepted 239 of 267 recommendations, including all of the UK’s recommendations. In December, the UK supported the rollover of EU sanctions against 12 individuals accused of being involved in planning, directing, or committing acts in the DRC that constitute serious human rights violations or abuses. Under the terms of the EU withdrawal agreement, the UK continues to implement these sanctions.

6.10 Egypt

The general trajectory of human rights in Egypt continued to decline in 2019, though there was some progress in certain areas. Space for freedom of expression and civil society continued to shrink. Media freedom and political opposition came under particular pressure: protests and attempts to organise politically resulted in the arrest and detention of activists, lawyers, journalists, and human rights defenders (HRDs), often on charges of terrorism or spreading false news. There was some progress on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief)) and gender equality.

Respect for media freedom continued to erode throughout 2019, with Egypt dropping 2 places in the World Press Freedom Index (163rd out of 180). According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 26 journalists were in prison at the end of the year, the third highest total in the world. Over half were detained in 2019. More than 500 websites remained blocked, including those of independent media outlets and human rights organisations. New media regulations passed in March gave regulators additional powers to block websites, impose fines, and terminate licences for a range of vaguely-defined offences. On 2 October, BBC Arabic became the latest media outlet to be blocked. On 24 November, security officials raided and arrested a number of staff at one of Egypt’s last independent media outlets, Mada Masr. The UK was the first country to comment publicly, through a statement by the then Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, Dr Morrison. All staff were released later that day.

There remained little space for civil society to operate in Egypt in 2019. HRDs linked to the Foreign Funding Case continued to face asset freezes and travel bans. The UK raised this issue in its advance questions ahead of Egypt’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on 13 November. Following concerted lobbying, a new NGO (Non Governmental Organisations) law was passed which removed some of the restrictions imposed by the controversial 2017 law. It remains to be seen whether the law will enable civil society organisations to operate more freely in practice.

Freedom of expression was also severely constrained. Space to voice opposition to constitutional changes passed in April was extremely restricted, and on 25 June at least 8 individuals were arrested on terrorism charges after planning to launch a new, moderate political coalition. Scattered protests across Egypt on 20 September were followed by mass arrests, including of human rights lawyers, activists, academics, and journalists. Egyptian lawyers recorded over 4,000 arrests following the protests. Many of those arrested remain in pre-trial detention.

There were some positive developments on FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief), starting in January with President Sisi opening the largest cathedral in the Middle East, and ending with preparations to reopen a newly restored synagogue in Alexandria.

The number of licences issued under the 2016 Church Building Law continued to increase, with over 1,222 church buildings receiving licences since the middle of 2018. Dr Morrison visited Cairo in September, meeting the Coptic Pope and reaffirming our mutual commitment to FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief). However, the arrest of Coptic activist Ramy Kamel for alleged terrorism offences on 23 November gave cause for concern.

On gender equality, Egypt made strong progress in some areas, including girls education and expanding social protection. There was also progress on the broader Women, Peace and Security agenda, and the National Council of Women continued to push for progressive policy formulation. However, the prevalence of female genital mutilation (FGM (female genital mutilation)) remained very high. Despite a strong legal framework on FGM (female genital mutilation), prosecutions were rare. According to the World Bank, female labour force participation fell to its lowest level in 2 decades, standing at 23%.

There was no evidence of an improvement in respect for the rights of LGBT people. Individuals continued to be subject to arrest and detention on charges of ‘debauchery’ or ‘inciting debauchery’. Forced anal examinations also continued to be reported. In January, after conducting an interview with an LGBT individual, TV host Mohamed Al-Ghaity was sentenced to a year in prison for contempt of religion, incitement to debauchery, and immorality.

Egypt retained the death penalty during 2019. At least 470 death sentences were issued, including 36 from military courts. According to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, 38 executions were estimated to have been carried out. During Egypt’s UPR in November the UK called on Egypt to reduce the number of crimes punishable by the death penalty, and to end the use of mass trials to issue death sentences.

Prison conditions remained an area of focus for the UK, with numerous reports of family visits and medical care being denied. Credible allegations of torture and mistreatment in detention continued to be reported. Unannounced inspections of prisons by independent bodies in line with international human rights standards were still not permitted. Concerns over specific cases were regularly raised with the Egyptian authorities, in London and in Cairo. During Egypt’s UPR, the UK publicly raised its concerns regarding extended pre-trial detention, solitary confinement, blocked prison inspections, and restricted access to medical care and family visits.

6.11 Eritrea

The main human rights concerns in Eritrea were the continued use of arbitrary detention as a means of suppression, the indefinite nature of the national service system, and violations of freedom of expression and of freedom of religion or belief.

In January, Eritrea became a member of the Human Rights Council. Following the peace agreement with Ethiopia in July 2018, Eritrea signalled that it wanted to renew its engagement with the UN through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, and underwent examination in January ⁵⁰, accepting 131 of the 261 recommendations tabled. The UK welcomed Eritrea’s engagement in the UPR process and tabled 3 recommendations, concerning reform of national service; action on political and religious detainees; and greater transparency of places of detention. We were disappointed that Eritrea did not accept any of the UK recommendations, but were encouraged by their support for recommendations from other States, covering the right to liberty and security of the person; the right to a fair trial for detainees; efforts aimed to improve the penitentiary system; and protection of the rights of detainees.

At the Human Rights Council in July, the UK co-sponsored a successful Item 2 resolution to renew the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea. Eritrea continued to refuse to cooperate with the Special Rapporteur or any thematic rapporteurs.

Eritrea still operates a system of universal and compulsory national service, with few exemptions, that for many is open-ended. Roles are both military and civilian. The justification for such service had been the frozen conflict – ‘no war, no peace’ – which had existed between Eritrea and Ethiopia for 16 years. Following the signing of the peace agreement with Ethiopia in July 2018, the terms of the agreement had not been implemented by either side by the end of 2019, and indefinite national service remained. In July, the Eritrean government said that it would undertake a review of national service, but it gave no deadline for the review’s completion.

Eritrea has no constitutional government or elections. 2019 saw a continued poor record on arbitrary detention, with the authorities in particular targeting political opponents and adherents to unapproved religions. The government does not allow access to places of detention and shares no information on detainees. There are, however, consistent reports that numerous high profile political figures remain in detention with no access to justice, some of whom have been detained for over 18 years following their criticism of the government.

The Government of Eritrea permits and regulates the practice of 4 religions - Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, Lutheran Christianity, and Sunni Islam – whose adherents enjoy freedom of worship. Activity by adherents of other religions is suppressed, and there are frequent reports of groups of peaceful worshippers being detained. This was highlighted in the Bishop of Truro’s Report ⁵¹ released in July. In May, our Ambassador raised concerns that the leaders of the Pentecostal church had been in jail for over 15 years without trial. That same month there were reports that more members of the Pentecostal church had been arrested. In July, the FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) issued a tweet ⁵² following reports that the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios, deposed in 2006 and held under house arrest, had been excommunicated for ‘heresy’. In June, in a measure to enforce a 1995 declaration to bring the provision of health services under state control, the government took over all the clinics managed by the Catholic Church. The government also continued its programme of transferring the management of religious schools to the state.

Eritrea was ranked 178 out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index, with all internal media operated by the state. 16 journalists, arbitrarily detained without trial during the 2000s, remained incarcerated. In May, Eritrea’s limited internet availability was reduced further when many of the internet cafes were closed down. A small number were subsequently reopened. There was, however, no attempt to block access to foreign satellite broadcasters.

In July, the Ministry of Justice agreed a comprehensive framework with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime to reduce crime, including: reform of the prison system bringing Eritrea in line with international standards and human rights norms; judicial reform including training for judges and prosecutors focusing on human rights and alternatives to imprisonment; law enforcement reform; and combatting transnational organised crime. This was part of the justice minister’s plans to transform her ministry, including increasing capacity and the professionalisation of staff.

Eritrea continued to make improvements against the Sustainable Development Goals. In November, at the UN Population Fund’s International Conference on Population Development in Nairobi, the Eritrean government committed to its goals on gender equality, including: the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls; ending sexual and gender based violence, female genital mutilation, and early or forced marriage; the provision of sex education for all young people, especially girls; the elimination of preventable maternal mortality and morbidities by 2022; and the reformulation of how Eritrea addresses sexual and reproductive health interventions. During the year, Eritrea also made significant progress on its vaccination programme.

6.12 Iran

Iran continued to violate human rights during 2019, carrying out the most deadly crackdown against internal unrest since the 1979 revolution. The UK’s main concerns were: the continued lack of fair trials; restricted access to legal representation, and due legal process, including for dual nationals (Chapter 3: consular assistance gives more detail); the widespread use of the death penalty; violations of the right to freedom of expression and to freedom of religion or belief; and the limitations on the right of women to participate fully in society.

It is difficult to monitor accurately how many executions take place each year in Iran, since not all are made public. Credible estimates suggested there were 235 executions in 2019. While this was a small reduction compared with the previous year, Iran still ranked as one of the most prolific users of the death penalty globally. This figure included at least 10 public executions, a practice which usually involves death by hanging in an open square, and 2 known executions of juvenile offenders who were under 18 years of age at the time of their deaths ²². Such actions violated Iran’s obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, both of which Iran has ratified.

At least 32 executions for drug-related crimes took place in 2019, according to international estimates – an increase of more than 50% compared to 2018. This figure was particularly concerning given that the 2017 Anti-Narcotics Law, which applies retroactively, allowed the judiciary to review most sentences and reduce punishment to imprisonment if appropriate. The death penalty still applied to the production and distribution of large amounts of opium, heroin, and methamphetamine, as well as for armed smugglers, ringleaders, and financiers.

The Iranian authorities’ response to the unrest in November, which was triggered by a sudden raise in petrol prices, was a serious and violent crackdown. There were credible reports of live fire against protesters and of mass arrests. Amnesty International stated that over 300 people died, and the Iranian media reported that Iran’s Interior Minister told the country’s parliament that an estimated 7,000 people had been arrested. European Union member states unanimously declared the widespread and disproportionate use of force as unacceptable, and called for the freedoms of assembly and of expression to be respected. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights urged the release from detention of all protestors who had been arbitrarily detained, and to ensure their right to due process.

There were serious concerns about restrictions on freedom of expression in Iran. The authorities initiated a near-total shutdown of the country’s internet and mobile data for more than a week during the November protests – the first time that this has occurred in Iran. Several foreign-based media outlets that reported on the unrest received threats to their staff, or to relatives in Iran, and some had assets frozen in retaliation. At least 15 journalists, bloggers, or social media activists were arrested during 2019. Several major social media websites, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, remain banned.

The Iranian authorities continued to violate the right to freedom of religion or belief and discriminated against ethnic minorities. Members of religious minorities faced restrictions for peacefully manifesting their beliefs. The authorities continued to persecute Baha’is, including through shop closures and the denial of mainstream education. More than 30 followers were reportedly arrested during 2019, often on unclear charges. While Christians notionally benefit from constitutional recognition and protection, they continued to be persecuted in a systemic and institutionalised manner. In September, the Iranian authorities sentenced a pastor and 8 converts to Christianity to 5 years in prison, despite Iran’s international obligation under the ICCPR to recognise an individual’s freedom to choose their religion.

Women in Iran continued to be denied the same rights and privileges as men, and to face discrimination, including unequal rights in marriage, divorce, and child custody. Protests against the compulsory wearing of the hijab continued, resulting in the arrest and imprisonment of several women. Following the death of Sahar Khodayari, a female football fan arrested for watching men’s matches, and FIFA’s ultimatum to allow women’s attendance, Iran responded to international pressure and permitted women to attend a game in October. However, this appeared to be a one-off concession, demonstrating the scale of the challenge to secure equal rights for women.

Iran continued to deny consular access to dual nationals in detention. In November, the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, raised with the Iranian Foreign Minister the cases of a number of British-Iranians detained in Iran, including Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. We will continue to raise all of our dual national detainee cases with Iran, including making requests for them to receive appropriate medical treatment and due process.

In September, the UK brought the international community together at a UK-hosted event at the UN General Assembly to shine a spotlight on Iran’s human rights abuses.

6.13 Iraq

The human rights situation in Iraq deteriorated sharply in 2019, particularly in the last quarter of the year. Systematic repression of popular demonstrations resulted in large-scale loss of life and casualties, detentions, and restrictions on the media and on access to information. Women and members of minorities remained marginalised, including from decision-making. The continued use of the death penalty, and forced returns of internally displaced persons (IDPs), remained concerns. Overall, the implementation of human rights protections and accountability remained weak.

Popular protests in Baghdad and southern Iraq towards the end of 2019, calling for reforms and the resignation of the government, were harshly repressed by elements of the Iraqi Security Forces and other armed groups. Since protests began in October, the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights (IHCHR) recorded 555 people killed, 24,000 injured (including Iraqi Security Forces), and 2,807 arrested, including 33 assassinations and 77 kidnappings of civil activists; with 98 still detained, and 53 abducted over the course of the protests. The UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) concluded that numerous human rights violations and abuses had been committed, including the use of lethal force against demonstrators, the unnecessary, disproportionate, and/or improper use of tear gas and stun grenades, abductions, multiple arrests, and continued efforts to limit media coverage of demonstrations. Security force personnel responsible for violations evaded justice. The UK raised concerns at these developments, condemned the excessive use of force by security forces, and called for accountability with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and Chief Justice, and in the United Nations Security Council on 3 December.

Respect for media freedom also deteriorated in 2019. NGOs raised concerns over a draft ‘Law on IT Crimes’ proposing imprisonment and fines for those seen as undermining national interests. A number of journalists covering the protests at the end of 2019 were murdered, while others faced intimidation, and a number of media offices were ransacked. In November, the National Communications and Media Commission closed 9 media companies for covering the protests, imposing severe restrictions on media freedom. The UK supported journalists and civil society activists through our International Programme, including on best practice, editorial standards, and advocacy.

Over 1.4 million people remain displaced across Iraq because of security concerns and a lack of access to services and jobs in their places of origin. Since 2014, the UK has committed £261 million in humanitarian support and £110 million in stabilisation funding, including £28 million to the UN’s Funding Facility for Stabilisation to help rebuild communities in liberated areas.

Human rights defenders highlighted concerns about the mistreatment of some IDPs, including all households headed by women still perceived as affiliated with Daesh. Children with unofficial birth certificates issued by Daesh were denied access to healthcare and education. In September, the UN and NGOs raised concerns over forced returns of IDPs to Anbar, Kirkuk, and Salahuddin provinces, despite security fears. The UK continued to monitor and raise concerns over restrictions of rights to freedom of movement, education, and services.

The societal effects of Daesh atrocities remained unresolved, in particular the stigma experienced by survivors and children born of sexual violence, and by those with perceived Daesh affiliation. In early 2019, the Yezidi Spiritual Council announced that children born of Daesh rape could not return to their communities. In April, the UK supported widening President Salih’s draft legislation proposing rehabilitation services and reparations for female Yezidis to include all female survivors of Daesh. In July, the UK announced an additional £1 million for the UN Investigative Team for the Accountability of Daesh.

Although Iraq’s Constitution requires 25% of MPs to be female, women continued to be marginalised by conservative social, religious, and tribal norms. Despite extensive lobbying by the UK and partners, the Iraqi cabinet had only one female minister. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) both the Parliamentary Speaker and Deputy Speaker were female and there were 3 female ministers in the Kurdistan Regional Government. ‘Honour’ killings against women, girls, and LGBT people continued, often unreported. The Iraqi parliament failed to pass a draft bill to criminalise domestic violence. Our International Programme projects in financial year, 2019 to 2020 include raising awareness of gender-based violence and protection services for girls and women in KRI; and legal/psychosocial support for female IDPs in Anbar and Baghdad provinces.

Widespread use of the death penalty continued against those convicted of membership of Daesh. Information from the Iraqi Ministry of Justice indicated that over 100 executions took place between January and August, while over 8,000 detainees were on death row; however, accurate official data remained difficult to obtain. Human rights monitors logged numerous reports of systematic abuse and torture during arrest and pre-trial detention. The UK continued to lobby against the use of the death penalty, for better conditions in prisons, and for consistent due process and transparency in investigations and trials.

6.14 The State of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

2019 saw continued violations by the Government of Israel (GoI) of human rights and international humanitarian law in the context of Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza (Occupied Palestinian Territories, or OPTs). Human rights abuses by the Palestinian Authority (PA), and by Hamas, the de facto administration in Gaza, continued.

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza was exacerbated by protests and escalations of violence between Israel and Palestinian armed groups. According to the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), a unit within the Israeli Ministry of Defence, 2,656 rockets and mortars, and 887 incendiary devices, were launched during 2019 into Israeli territory, causing 286 fires. In total, 5 Israeli civilians were killed. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 107 Palestinians were killed, including 36 by live ammunition fired by Israeli forces.

In March, a UN Commission of Inquiry (CoI) issued its report into alleged violations during the demonstrations in Gaza in 2018. The CoI concluded there were grounds to believe that in 187 of 189 fatalities, the use of live ammunition by Israeli security forces against demonstrators was unlawful. It did not investigate Hamas abuses, stating there was little information available. Israel referred eleven incidents of lethal force to the Military Attorney General for further investigation. In one case, one Israeli soldier was convicted. The UK continued to call for investigations into, and accountability for, excessive use of force in Gaza and the West Bank.

The UK continued to fund projects to help address Israeli restrictions on movement and access to and from Gaza, including legal advocacy to facilitate exit permits for traders and for Gazans seeking professional and educational opportunities.

Israel continued its systemic policy of settlement expansion, a breach of international humanitarian law, which the UK continued to oppose. During 2019, Israel advanced 9,865 units in the West Bank.

Israeli demolitions of Palestinian structures increased. According to the UN OCHA, 621 structures were demolished or seized in 2019, including 203 in East Jerusalem; the highest number of demolitions there since 2000. 914 Palestinians were displaced during 2019. In April, Israel introduced a one-year pilot of a new military order to fast-track demolitions with less discretion for judicial review. In July, Israeli authorities demolished ten Palestinian homes in areas where planning powers nominally reside with the PA. The UK continued to fund legal aid for Palestinians contesting eviction and demolition cases.

UN OCHA reported that 27 Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces and settlers in the West Bank in 2019. The Israeli Security Agency (ISA) reported that in 2019 4 Israeli civilians were killed in the West Bank, as well one Israeli soldier. According to UN OCHA, the number of acts of violence and vandalism perpetrated by settlers against Palestinians increased for the third year running. ISA recorded 1,132 violent attacks by Palestinians in the West Bank. In January, Israel did not renew the mandate of the Temporary International Presence in Hebron. The UK expressed its concern over the development through a statement by the then Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, Alistair Burt.

The number of Palestinian minors in Israeli detention decreased, with 186 detained at the end of 2019. We continued to seek improvements in their treatment. There were some improvements to legal access. The Fourth Geneva Convention provides that protected persons accused of offences shall be detained in the occupied territory. According to the UN Secretary-General, most Palestinian prisoners continued to be held in Israel.

We continued to urge the PA to respect human rights, ensure that complaints of ill treatment were properly investigated, and improve the security sector’s compliance with international human rights standards. The PA drafted legislation to establish a National Preventive Mechanism against Torture, which would visit detention facilities and report on conditions.

In the West Bank, the PA continued to restrict space for civil society and freedom of expression. In October, a PA court ordered the shutdown of 59 news websites. However, the number of Palestinians detained in cases related to freedom of expression decreased. The UK called for the strengthening of respect for media freedom, including through legislative amendments.

In Gaza, Hamas continued to exercise strict control over civil society. In March, it violently cracked down on a protest against socioeconomic conditions, beating and detaining many demonstrators.

Hamas issued 2 death sentences in 2019. While the UK maintains a no-contact policy with Hamas, we made clear publicly our objections to its use of the death penalty.

Despite commitments from the PA on the protection of women, significant work continued to be required to improve access to justice and financial capital. Positive steps would include adopting the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women in full, and enshrining the Family Protection Bill in law.

Israel remained a robust open democracy with a vibrant civil society. However, pressure continued on those criticising Israel’s conduct in the OPTs, including rhetorical attacks by politicians, and visa delays and denials for activists working in the OPTs. In November, Israel expelled Human Rights Watch Country Director Omar Shakir, citing his alleged support for boycott actions against Israel.

6.15 Libya

In 2019, the human rights situation in Libya deteriorated further, as a result of the armed conflict which re-ignited in April. The situation was exacerbated by multiple breaches of the UN arms embargo. It was clear that Libya was enduring a proxy war, with a range of countries providing external military support to different sides. Reported human rights violations or abuses included: loss of life, including attacks on civilians and refugees; discrimination against women and girls; and limits to freedom of expression and of religion or belief. The UK worked to address these through a range of activities, supporting UN-led efforts towards a sustainable political settlement, and programme work addressing the most acute challenges.

After the fighting began in April, neighbourhoods were subject to indiscriminate shelling, with over 100,000 people displaced. During 2019, the UN documented at least 284 civilian deaths and 363 injuries as a result of the conflict – an increase of more than 25% compared with 2018 ⁵⁴. Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, Ghassan Salamé, noted 60 attacks against medical facilities or personnel between January and November ⁵⁵. Human rights groups reported violations or abuses of human rights or of international humanitarian law (IHL) across the conflict. Alleged abuses by forces aligned with the Libya National Army (LNA) included destruction of civilian property, and indiscriminate killings and executions. LNA-aligned militia commander, Mahmoud al-Werfalli, was promoted, despite remaining subject to a war crimes indictment by the International Criminal Court ⁵⁶. The 2019 UN Panel of Experts report listed reported violations or abuses of human rights or IHL by both LNA-aligned forces and by forces aligned with the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA). The report noted that indiscriminate explosive ordnance strikes were widespread and were attributable to both sides. Some reported abuses were attributed to Daesh ⁵⁷. The UK emphasised publicly the need for all parties to respect IHL ⁵⁸, and highlighted reported human rights violations and abuses and the importance of accountability ⁵⁹.

The security and justice sector remained areas of concern, with continuing reports of arbitrary detentions. The death penalty remained part of Libyan law, though no sentences were carried out during 2019. At an operational level, the UK embarked on an ambitious 5-year project (2018 to 2022) to develop a human rights-compliant detention pathway from arrest to imprisonment, working closely with both the Libyan government and NGO (Non Governmental Organisations) partners.

The situation for migrants and refugees remained serious. As of September ⁶⁰, there were around 636,000 migrants in Libya, with over 100,000 living in Tripoli. Conditions for those detained in official detention centres (some 4,200 ⁶¹) were often dire. Human rights groups documented sexual violence, forced labour, torture, deprivation of food and water, physical violence, and the murder of detainees. Despite UK warnings, no realistic alternatives to detention were developed. The UK contributed to the humanitarian effort and continued to engage with Libyan parties and the international community to address the challenge. Despite an increase in interception operations by the Libyan coastguard in 2019, the situation for migrants returned to Libya remained appalling. An airstrike by LNA-aligned forces which hit a migrant detention centre in Tajoura in July killed at least 53 people ⁶².

Discrimination against women, and sexual and gender-based violence continued. The possibility for equal participation was already limited, and the political and security vacuum after April heightened the vulnerability of women and girls. Libya remained a focus country of the UK's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (WPS (Women, Peace and Security)). Libya was ranked 158th of 167 countries on the Georgetown Institute for WPS (Women, Peace and Security) Index (2019). The UK's priorities continue to be the promotion of political inclusion, economic opportunities and governance, and tackling social inequalities. The UK is providing £2.75 million of Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF (Conflict, Stability and Security Fund)) funding (2017 to 2020) to build the capacity of local civil society partners across Libya. Our gender project 'Ante Raeda' supported local civil society organisations (CSOs (civil society organisations)) which focused on empowering women, and helping them to understand their rights, in order to promote political, economic, and social change.

Widespread restrictions on freedom of expression, association, assembly, and religion or belief continued. For example, there were reports of arbitrary arrests and detention of followers of Sufism and of attacks against religious sites. In March, before the increased levels of violence, the GNA suspended issuing licences for public demonstrations, citing 'security threats'. Space for civil society in Libya decreased. While there has been no proof of implementation or enforcement, Presidency Council Decree 286 (2018) limited the activity of civil society groups, prohibiting international donations and political, military, or security engagement. Civilians expressing minority political views in both Tripoli and Benghazi were reportedly intimidated. As of December, the fate of politician and LNA critic Siham Sergewa, abducted in Benghazi on 17 July, remained unknown. Members of CSOs (civil society organisations) have reported interrogations on returning to Libya from UK-sponsored events.

Restrictions to media freedom remained concerning. As of 2 May, the UN Support Mission in Libya had reviewed at least 23 cases of threats, intimidation, and violence against journalists since 2018 ⁶³. As of December 2019, CSSF (Conflict, Stability and Security Fund) funding had trained over 200 Libyan journalists on impartial media standards. The UK co-sponsored a human rights workshop for journalists to raise awareness of the importance of media freedom.

6.16 Republic of Maldives

The human rights situation in Maldives improved in 2019 as President Solih's new government took steps to consolidate democracy, improve governance, and promote respect for human rights. Discriminatory laws were reviewed, political prisoners were released, and exiled politicians began to return to the country. Freedom of

expression improved generally, with a more permissive environment for civil society, media, and the opposition. Parliament passed a number of legislative reforms that further embedded democratic principles. During 2019, Maldives hosted several Commonwealth delegations following their application to rejoin the organisation ⁴⁴.

In 2019, citizens enjoyed greater freedom of expression and assembly. Some public gatherings and protests were permitted, while members of the opposition were free to demonstrate in support of former President Yameen during the criminal investigation against him, and against his detention. While this trend was encouraging, the closure in November of the civil society organisation Maldivian Democracy Network following its 2016 report on extremism, which was found to be disrespectful of Islam (and therefore unlawful according to the Maldivian Constitution), raised some concerns around freedom of expression and the space in which civil society can operate. Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief)) also remained a concern with continued constraints on the freedom to worship.

In January, a day after a magistrate sentenced a 25-year-old woman to death by stoning on charges of adultery, the Supreme Court reversed the ruling. While Maldives retains the death penalty, it has not been enforced in over 65 years. The Child Rights Protection Act, ratified in November, raised the age of consent for marriage to 18, and abolished the death penalty for crimes committed by those below the age of 18.

Parliamentary elections in April, in which President Solih's Maldivian Democratic Party won a clear majority, were, according to a Commonwealth observation mission, peaceful, credible, transparent, and inclusive. However, women remained underrepresented in Parliament, winning only 4 of 87 seats. While women made up half of the civil service, they were under-represented in senior positions. In September, parliament approved the appointment of the first 2 female Supreme Court justices. In December, the government reserved one third of council seats for women in the local elections due in April 2020.

Parliament took steps to reform the judiciary and established an independent Bar association. The Judicial Service Commission began to address corruption in the judiciary, dismissing a number of judges for incompetence and misconduct. In October, the government introduced a transitional justice bill, which will create an ombudsman to investigate human rights violations committed by state officials and ensure justice for victims.

Presidential Commissions on Murders and Enforced Disappearances and on Corruption and Asset Recovery were granted legal powers by parliament in June. The Commission on Murders reported on several cases of violence, including the abduction and murder of journalist Ahmed Rilwan in 2014. In December, the Commission announced that it would seek charges against 2 local suspects for 3 murders of a politician, journalist, and blogger.

In July, Maldives became a signatory to the Global Pledge on Media Freedom. In November Maldives joined the Executive Group of the Media Freedom Coalition. Maldives rose 22 places to rank 98 in the annual Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index.

The government sought to reform prisons in Maldives and vowed to end torture and inhumane treatment, following the reported abuse of 6 inmates at Maafushi prison in June. The Human Rights Commission submitted its findings on the death in custody in 2017 of protester Abdulla Rasheed, who was jailed for assaulting a police officer during the 2015 May Day protest. The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Nils Melzer, visited Maldives in November and highlighted deplorable prison conditions, the lack of accountability for torture or ill-treatment, and the need to end impunity for past violations. The Special Rapporteur also expressed concern about the treatment of migrant workers, noting reports of impounded passports and a failure to honour contracts. The government undertook to address these concerns, working with the International Organization for Migration. In December, President Solih announced that Maldives has signed the declaration in relation to Article 22 of the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The UN Committee Against Torture now has the authority to receive and consider complaints of torture and inhuman acts from those within the jurisdiction of the Maldives.

Maldives demonstrated greater international commitment to human rights and actively contributed to the Human Rights Council session held in February and March, co-sponsoring several resolutions, including on environmental human rights defenders and on the rights of the child. Maldives welcomed visits by 2 UN Special Rapporteurs, the first visits by UN Special Rapporteurs since 2013. The Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment visited in November, and by the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights in June.

In June, the Council of the EU revoked its sanctions framework against Maldives in light of the improved political and human rights situation. This followed the fourth annual Policy Dialogue in March between the EU and Maldives. In December, Maldives was invited to make a formal application to rejoin the Commonwealth, having welcomed 2 assessment missions as well as the election observer mission referred to above.

In 2019, the first UK resident Ambassador arrived in Maldives.

6.17 Myanmar

2019 saw a deterioration in the human rights situation in some parts of the country. The situation as a whole remained poor. Human rights violations and abuses were committed by the Myanmar security forces and ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) across the country. There was no demonstrable progress on accountability for these violations and abuses.

Of the 500,000 to 600,000 Rohingya remaining in Rakhine State, most continued to have their freedom of movement restricted and were confined to their homes with little access to markets and livelihoods. The Rohingya continued to fear for their security, lacking protection against vigilante attacks and theft of property. The UK continued to urge the Myanmar government to implement the Rakhine Advisory Commission’s recommendations, which would be a clear step towards improving the human rights situation in the state. The UK remained at the forefront of the humanitarian response for over a million refugees in Bangladesh, funding £256 million to address the crisis since August 2017.

During 2019, civilians were severely affected by a sharp escalation in fighting between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar security forces in Rakhine State. As of December, it was estimated that between 48,000 and 100,000 people had been displaced by this conflict. Human rights violations and abuses were also documented in Shan, Chin, and Kachin states, where the decades-long conflicts between EAOs and the military continued to displace thousands of civilians. By the end of 2019, the total population of concern to UNHCR at some 866,000, including 238,000 internally displaced persons in Kachin, northern Shan, and south-eastern Myanmar.

Myanmar security forces continued to deploy anti-personnel mines (landmines) in 2019. Anti-personnel mines were also used by EAOs. There was evidence of casualties in previously uncontaminated areas. The UK funded the Mine Action Group and the HALO Trust, which provided mine risk education and surveys to citizens.

The UK applied targeted EU sanctions on 14 individuals and an arms embargo. In August, the UN Fact Finding Mission released its final reports, and the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar became operational. The UK has been a longstanding supporter of both bodies in the UN Human Rights Council and UN Security Council.

Myanmar’s Independent Commission of Enquiry (ICOE) continued its investigations into alleged violations and abuses in Rakhine. We continued to push for publication of a final report. The UK urged Myanmar to ensure that the final report was credible, transparent, and adhered to international standards.

In November, The Gambia brought a case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, on the basis that Myanmar had allegedly breached its obligations under the Genocide Convention. Separately, the International Criminal Court commenced an investigation into alleged crimes against humanity committed, at least in part, on the territory of Bangladesh, against the Rohingya.

In 2019, gender inequality remained a serious problem in Myanmar. The country’s global ranking on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS (Women, Peace and Security)) Index fell from 119th in 2018 to 150th in 2019. Myanmar’s Technical Working Group on WPS (Women, Peace and Security), part of its National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women, struggled to make progress.

Women continued to be seriously underrepresented in Myanmar’s political processes. Only 10% of national MPs were women and only State Counsellor (and de facto leader) Aung San Suu Kyi held a national ministerial position. In August, the UN Fact Finding Mission reported ⁶⁵ that the Myanmar security forces, and ethnic armed organisations to a lesser extent, used sexual violence as a weapon of war.

Human trafficking, especially of women, remained a serious issue throughout Myanmar. Myanmar is a focus country in the UK’s National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2018 to 2022. The British Embassy supported work to improve women’s participation in politics, peace efforts, and civil society, including in preparation for the 2020 election. The UK continued to lobby the Myanmar government on conflict-related sexual violence, gender-based violence, and to meet international standards on gender issues.

In May, the Myanmar President pardoned 2 Reuters journalists, imprisoned for over 500 days for investigating a massacre by the military in Inn Din village. The journalists served longer sentences than the soldiers who carried out the massacre. The UK worked hard to secure the journalists’ release, and welcomed the President’s decision. Nevertheless, the space for free expression in Myanmar continued to shrink in 2019. Hundreds of social and political activists faced prosecution, including through the increased use of repressive laws, for exercising free speech. The UK continued to speak out in defence of freedom of expression.

6.18 Pakistan

There remained serious human rights concerns and violations in Pakistan in 2019, including restrictions on civic space and freedom of expression, intolerance, and direct and open discrimination towards some minorities. Concerns continued about the prevalence of bonded and child labour, and the failure to uphold the rights of women and children. The imposition and use of the death penalty continued. There was some progress on death penalty reform. The UK welcomed establishment of a Parliamentary Committee on Forced Conversions and the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor for Sikh pilgrims.

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government came into power in 2018 with a commitment to guarantee the protection of minorities, tackle inequality, and protect child rights. The Ministry of Human Rights began work on a range of new legislation. This covered protection from torture, enforced disappearances, the safety of journalists, Christian marriage and divorce, and child protection. At the end of the year, progress on human rights legislation was at varying stages and none had yet been written into law. In January, a bill to amend the Child Marriage and Restraint Act, to bring the marriageable age of girls to 18 years, was passed by the Senate. However, reservations by

conservative parliamentarians meant that by the end of 2019 it had not proceeded for discussion by the National Assembly. The Zainab Alert, Recovery and Response Bill 2019, to improve response to the kidnapping of children, was sent to the National Assembly Standing Committee on Human Rights in April and presented to the house. It was still pending in December. The UK continued to urge Pakistan to improve the human rights situation for all its citizens. In February, the Minister for Human Rights Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, visited Pakistan and discussed the full range of human rights issues. In July, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, attended the Global Conference for Media Freedom in London.

Civic space and freedom of expression faced growing restrictions. The media came under increased pressure and censorship, including threats and intimidation towards journalists, and state interference. Pakistan fell to 142nd of 180 countries in the Reporter's Without Borders 2019 World Press Freedom Index. Opposition leaders and other critics of the authorities faced increasing difficulties in expressing their opinions, including through social media. Reports of enforced disappearances of human rights defenders, journalists, and others continued. The legal regime regulating local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) remained opaque. The UK supported efforts to raise the profile of the issues faced by NGOs among government figures, parliamentarians, civil society representatives, and journalists.

Discrimination and violence against members of Muslim minorities, religious minorities and minority ethnic communities continued, especially against Ahmadiyya Muslims and Christians, but also Hindus and Shia Muslims, including Hazaras. The use of blasphemy laws remained a concern, with many detained awaiting court hearings. Ahmadiyya Muslims and non-Muslim religious minorities remain unable to hold presidential or prime ministerial office after a bill to allow this was blocked in the National Assembly in November. Reports of Hindu and Christian women being forced to convert to Islam, or to marry Muslim men, continued. In January, the acquittal of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy in 2010, was upheld by the Supreme Court. In November, a Parliamentary Committee to Protect Minorities from Forced Conversions was formed to work on relevant legislation. A positive development was the Kartarpur Corridor opening, allowing Sikh pilgrims visa-free access to shrines in India and Pakistan. The UK supported efforts to identify barriers to religious freedom for members of minorities. We engaged youth and community discussion on this issue through digital media and community outreach projects. We also worked to strengthen provincial government support to minorities and to improve civil society advocacy skills. The Bishop of Truro's report of FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) Support for Persecuted Christians highlighted issues faced by Christians and other minorities in Pakistan.

Discrimination and violence against women and girls remained prevalent. Pakistan ranked 151st of 153 countries in the World Economic Forum 2020 Gender Gap Index. The female literacy rate was just 46.5%. The Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Bill was passed by the Senate in April, but was later rejected by the National Assembly Standing Committee on Law and Justice. Despite stronger laws to protect women from violence, enforcement remained weak. The DFID (Department for International Development) AAWAZ II Accountability, Inclusion and Reducing Modern Slavery Programme worked with communities in Pakistan to promote the rights of women, protect them from exploitation, and prevent discrimination and intolerance.

Modern slavery, especially bonded and child labour, continued to be a major problem. The Global Slavery Index 2018 estimated that over 3 million people were living in modern slavery in Pakistan. FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) International Programme activity raised awareness, and encouraged community debate on issues such as early or forced marriages, child trafficking, and bonded labour. A UK-funded project sought to develop a better understanding of the forms of modern slavery in Pakistan to inform future work.

In December, a UK-funded case study on The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 was launched. This aimed to analyse the passage of this bill and suggest lessons for the future. More remained to be done to ensure effective implementation, with LGBT persons continuing to face discrimination.

Pakistan retained the death penalty for 27 separate offences. Particular concerns remained over death row prisoners with mental and physical illnesses. In October, the Minister for Human Rights, Dr Shireen Mazari, announced plans to streamline the presidential pardon process. Our work supported a study of death penalty cases through the lower court system to improve understanding of the operation of this system.

The legal basis which allowed military courts to try civilians facing terrorism charges lapsed in March and was not subsequently renewed. It remained difficult to assess the compliance of these courts with international standards because of a lack of transparency and independent scrutiny. Special anti-terrorism courts continued to operate with long delays and low prosecution rates. Reports of the detention of prisoners without trial and of extrajudicial killings by the security forces continued.

6.19 Russia

The human rights situation in Russia deteriorated further in 2019. Space for civil society reduced, as the government cracked down on dissent. However, Russian civil society showed increasing willingness to mobilise to challenge human rights violations.

Democratic processes were increasingly controlled, and electoral filters prevented many opposition candidates from standing. In Moscow, the authorities prevented all genuine opposition candidates from standing in the September municipal elections, often on spurious grounds. This sparked a summer of protests, with one demonstration

attracting 50,000 participants (the largest since 2012). In response, the authorities violently blocked protests and arrested around 2,500 of protesters. Ten protesters received lengthy prison sentences, despite the largely peaceful nature of the protests.

While 2019 saw an increase in grassroots activism, Russia remained a hostile environment for many NGOs, especially those working on human rights issues. The authorities continued to use the ‘Foreign Agents’ and ‘Undesirable Foreign Organisations’ laws to fine or close critical NGOs. Opposition activists were systematically fined or imprisoned, to prevent them from participating in political life. The authorities repeatedly raided the offices of opposition activist Alexei Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation.

Most media outlets were tightly controlled by the government, and the environment for remaining independent media outlets remained hostile. The Foreign Agents Law was extended to restrict the distribution of items originating in foreign media sources. Continued impunity for the murder of journalists (including of Nikolay Andrushchenko in 2017) exerted a chilling effect, especially in the North Caucasus. The authorities attempted to reduce online dissent, including by banning web-users from ‘insulting’ officials or the government. Moves to isolate the Russian internet had the potential to restrict online space further, and followed the earlier banning of LinkedIn and attempt to block Telegram.

The Russian justice system continued to be characterised by very high prosecution rates, with over 99% of defendants found guilty. Many trials involve periods of lengthy pre-trial detention or house-arrest, especially for prominent activists, including Roman Udot and Yuri Dmitriev. There are examples of individuals, such as Oyub Titiev, being convicted on the basis of fabricated and politically motivated charges. Although in rare cases, such as those of Ivan Golunov and Pavel Ustinov, the authorities dropped or reduced charges in the face of public outcry, many charges widely reported as false resulted in lengthy detention.

The persecution of religious minorities including Jehovah’s Witnesses intensified, with 489 house searches in 2019 and over 300 Jehovah’s Witnesses facing criminal charges by the end of the year, according to The European Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses. In 2019, 18 Jehovah’s Witnesses received jail sentences, with Denis Christensen receiving a 6 year term for practicing his faith.

Domestic abuse continued to be a major problem in Russia, and while figures remained unreliable, NGOs believed levels had increased since domestic abuse was partially decriminalised in 2017.

LGBT people in Russia faced an increasingly hostile environment, including laws against the ‘promotion of non-traditional relationships’. While polling suggested that public attitudes might be shifting in some big cities, in Chechnya LGBT people continued to face systematic persecution, including arrest, torture, and murder, according to the Lavada-Center. In 2018, the UK was one of 15 states to invoke the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s ([OSCE \(Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe\)](#)) Moscow Mechanism over human rights violations in Chechnya, requiring an investigation without Russian consent. The resulting December 2018 report documented a culture of impunity in Chechnya. The authorities did not respond to the [OSCE \(Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe\)](#)’s request for a full investigation, and reports indicated that persecution intensified in January, with at least 2 gay men dying in custody having been subjected to torture. The UK publicly condemned these abuses. In March, the UK and 31 other countries delivered a statement to the UN Human Rights Council on the persecution of LGBT people in Chechnya.

In Georgia’s breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, increased Russian interference led to a sharp deterioration in the human rights situation. Continued closure of the majority of crossing points along the Administrative Boundary Line raised tensions and resulted in frequent detentions and severe restrictions on freedom of movement, affecting livelihoods, education, and access to healthcare. Discrimination against ethnic Georgians and intimidation of members of civil society continued. The UK supported Georgian resolutions at the UN General Assembly on internally displaced persons and at the UN Human Rights Council requesting access for the Office of the UN High Representative for Human Rights.

The Government of Russia also committed human rights violations in illegally annexed Crimea and, through its support to separatists, in eastern Ukraine. The Russian Federation ignored calls by the UN General Assembly to allow international monitoring organisations access to Crimea, preventing a full independent assessment of the human rights situation. The de facto authorities continued to restrict freedom of assembly, expression, association, religion or belief, and movement, using arbitrary arrest and detentions in an attempt to suppress criticism and dissent on the peninsula. Crimean Tatars continued to be persecuted, with reports of weekly raids on their homes. In contravention of the 2017 International Court of Justice order, which stated that the activities of the Mejlis, a traditional organisation of the Crimean Tatar people, should be allowed to resume, the organisation remained banned in Crimea.

Despite the long overdue release in September of 11 political prisoners, including Oleg Sentsov, at least 89 Ukrainian political prisoners remained in detention in Crimea and Russia. We remained concerned at UN and [NGO \(Non Governmental Organisations\)](#) reports of the torture, ill-treatment, and denial of medical care to persons unlawfully detained in Crimea and Russia, and continued to call for their immediate release.

In eastern Ukraine, the UN Monitoring Mission on Human Rights estimated that the Russian-backed conflict had cost over 13,000 lives, with almost 30,000 injured. Over 1.4 million people were registered as internally displaced. Arbitrary arrests and incommunicado detention, torture, ill-treatment, and restrictions on freedom of movement were carried out with impunity by Russian-backed separatists.

6.20 Saudi Arabia

Social reform in Saudi Arabia continued in 2019. Greater legal rights for women in family and employment law, and the removal of most guardianship requirements, moderately improved women’s rights. However, the overall clampdown on civil and political space continued. A number of activists, clerics, and academics were tried in terrorist courts. Diplomats were not allowed to observe these trials. The use of the death penalty increased in 2019, and included the execution of 37 men on a single day.

The Vision 2030 economic diversification programme continued to offer increased opportunities for women’s economic participation. Female labour force participation remained low, but increased from 21.9% in 2018 to 26.0% in the last 3 months of 2019, exceeding the target of 25% for 2019. Changes to employment law banned workplace gender discrimination, and enforced gender equality in hiring practices.

In August, the requirement for women over 21 to have a guardian’s permission to apply for a passport or to leave the country was abolished. At the same time, the Saudi government reformed family law, granting women greater rights for divorce and child custody cases.

Freedom of expression and of the press remained highly restricted. Saudi Arabia was ranked 172nd out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index, down from 169th in 2018. There were further arrests throughout the year of writers and academics. Despite some releases, many arrested in the political clampdown since September 2017 remained in detention. UK ministers raised concerns in this regard with the Saudi authorities on a number of occasions.

Of the women’s rights defenders arrested in 2018, at least 12 women remained on trial at the end of 2019, in Riyadh’s Criminal Court and the Specialised Criminal Court. Seven of them were released on bail. We repeatedly called for access to legal representation for these women, raised concerns about the use of solitary confinement, and pressed for due process. The then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, raised our concerns with Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in March. Minister for Human Rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, raised these cases with the Saudi authorities during his visit focused on human rights at the invitation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in September, the first such invitation to a UK Human Rights Minister. Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, raised concerns with Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir in October.

In March, the UK was signatory to the joint statement published at the UN Human Rights Council ([HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#)) which expressed significant concerns over the arrests of women’s rights defenders. In September, the UK was signatory to the joint statement published at the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) expressing concern over the detention and reported torture of political activists, the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, and the use of the death penalty.

According to statistics issued by the Saudi Press Agency, 184 people were executed in 2019 (compared with 149 people in 2018), including the execution of 37 men on a single day. Five were minors at the time of their offences, despite the passage of a law in 2018 excluding juveniles from death sentences. In April, the then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, raised concerns with Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir. We continued to make clear to the Saudi authorities our strong opposition to the death penalty in all circumstances.

The trial sessions of those accused of killing Jamal Khashoggi concluded in December. British diplomats attended as part of a group of international observers. The UK repeatedly called for a transparent, credible judicial process, full accountability for all those found responsible, and steps to ensure that this type of incident could never happen again. Following the trial, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab issued a statement reiterating the importance of justice, accountability, and ensuring that such an atrocity could not be repeated. The UK acknowledged the work of Agnes Callamard, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, for her detailed report into the killing of Jamal Khashoggi in a national statement delivered at the [HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#) in June.

With the exception of the trial for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, diplomats were not permitted to observe trials in 2019. In September, Lord Ahmad raised our concerns in this respect with the Saudi authorities.

Freedom of religion or belief remained restricted and it continued to be illegal to publicly practise a religion other than Islam. In his 2019 Ramadan message, King Salman bin Abdulaziz called for tolerance and moderation in Islam. Private worship of religions other than Islam was tolerated.

During 2019, the Saudi government introduced a system to ensure that migrant workers know their rights and to help resolve complaints, and launched a ‘wages protection system’. Nevertheless, migrant workers remained vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. In July and September, Lord Ahmad raised modern slavery with the Saudi authorities.

6.21 Somalia

Despite progress in recent years, Somalia remained a fragile, conflict-affected country. Al-Shabaab, the main terrorist and insurgent group in the country, continued to threaten the general population. Human development indicators were poor, governance was often weak, and many security forces and judicial institutions lacked training or capacity.

The UK worked through a range of international fora to promote greater respect for human rights in Somalia. For example, at the 42nd session of the UN Human Rights Council the UK and Somalia co-sponsored a resolution in which the Somali Government committed to continuing their co-operation with the UN Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Somalia. Human rights also featured prominently in the EU’s Article VIII Dialogue with Somalia and at the Somalia Partnership Forum (SPF), a high level platform for international engagement on development in Somalia, held in Mogadishu in October.

2019 was a challenging year for freedom of expression. Somali journalists faced a dangerous operating environment, including threats from Al-Shabaab and powerful private interests, as well as unfair treatment by local authorities. According to the main Somali journalist associations, arbitrary arrests, physical assaults, and intimidation of journalists continued to be rampant. On 2 November, the President’s office pledged to ‘serve justice’ on anyone infringing the rights of journalists; the Somali Foreign Minister also attended the Global Conference for Media Freedom in London in July. The UK remained a strong advocate on media freedom issues, lobbying to resolve individual cases and for a revised Media Law. The British Ambassador issued a public statement expressing solidarity with journalists in Somalia, and questioning the arrests of the journalists Abdulkadir Barre Moallim and Ahmed Sheikh Mohamed.

Somalia is due to hold parliamentary and presidential elections in late 2020 and early 2021. In December, the Lower House of the Somali Parliament began considering a draft Electoral Law and amendments to the Political Parties Law. The UK pressed for timely, constitutional, and direct elections in which all communities are fairly represented, as well as for the Federal Government to honour a pledge that at least 30% of seats would be held by women.

The process for selecting a new president of Jubaland in August was deeply flawed. The state’s electoral law excluded a number of potential candidates from standing for the presidency, and left the final choice of state MPs up to the Jubaland Electoral Commission. The process was also marred by violence and by intimidation of political opponents and journalists covering the election. In Jubaland and Puntland, political parties faced difficulties opening offices.

Somalia, including Somaliland, remained one of the most difficult places in the world to be a woman, with women excluded from many economic, social, and political opportunities, and girls starting school late and dropping out early. Child, early and forced marriages were common; and female genital mutilation (FGM (female genital mutilation)) remained pervasive. Parliament was due to consider a sexual offences bill during 2019 but did not do so. The UK supported work in communities to reduce and eradicate FGM (female genital mutilation), child, early and forced marriage, and intimate partner violence. DFID (Department for International Development)’s Girls Education Challenge programme worked to provide access to education for marginalised girls, including those who had been internally displaced.

The UK also promoted human rights through its support to the Somali security sector. For example, during 2019 the UK helped to provide human rights training to 2,270 soldiers from the Somali National Army, as well as training for ‘female engagement teams’ from the African Union Mission to Somalia, to help ensure that the mission is sensitive to women and girls’ issues in its area of operations.

Somalia, including Somaliland, retained the use of the death penalty. The UK registered with Somali and Somaliland authorities its longstanding policy of opposing the death penalty in all circumstances.

Humanitarian crises again affected many Somalis. Late spring rains led to serious food security issues for over 2 million people. In addition, intense autumn rains displaced around 370,000 people, as well as damaging crops, shelter, and vital infrastructure. DFID (Department for International Development) supported approximately 125,000 people with drinking water, food, hygiene, health, and nutrition, and the Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF (Conflict, Stability and Security Fund)) provided shelter, flood defence, and recovery tools for an additional 30,000 people.

It was a challenging year for democratic rights and freedoms in Somaliland. A further postponement of parliamentary and local council elections extended the Lower and Upper House terms to 17 and 25 years respectively, far beyond their 5-year constitutional limit, and left councils operating without a mandate. In addition, the National Human Rights Commission raised concern over arbitrary detention following the arrest of a sitting MP, and further concern was raised by the week-long detention of 2 opposition politicians without charge. The Somaliland Journalists Association recorded 31 instances of violations against journalists, in addition to the forced closure of 2 TV stations, one newspaper, and one news website. A long-awaited media law that would decriminalise many media offences remained in draft.

Nevertheless, there were a number of steps to improve the functioning and accountability of the Somaliland police and judiciary. The UK-supported Judicial Monitoring and Inspection Committee became fully operational, processing disciplinary complaints from the public, which led the constitutionally mandated High Judicial

Commission to dismiss 2 judges on corruption charges. The UK also began a programme to improve working relations between law enforcement agencies and journalists, with the goal of reducing the number of arbitrary arrests.

6.22 South Sudan

Grave human rights violations and abuses remained prevalent during 2019 despite reductions in armed conflict. Where fighting continued, UN reporting suggested that all parties to the conflict targeted and killed civilians, committed sexual violence, recruited children, and forcibly displaced communities with impunity. In addition, arbitrary restrictions on freedom of expression threatened to undermine the peace process.

The top human rights concern remained conflict-related violations and abuses. The revitalised peace agreement (R-ARCSS) signed in September 2018 reduced levels of armed conflict and associated human rights violations and abuses, but fighting continued, particularly in the southern equatorial region. All sides continued to target civilians deliberately: raids on villages, public executions, and sexual violence were used to displace people, or to punish them for allegedly supporting rival groups. Between September 2018 and April 2019, the violence caused the internal displacement of 56,000 people, and nearly 20,000 fled as refugees ⁶⁶. Abduction and forced recruitment, including the recruitment and use of children, was a persistent problem across the country. In addition, incomplete implementation of R-ARCSS meant that many schools and hospitals remained occupied by armed groups awaiting cantonment. Many child soldiers were still members of armed groups.

UN reporting continued to show high levels of conflict-related sexual violence, including rape, and abduction of women and girls for sexual slavery. According to the UN, sexual violence was also used as a form of torture by government forces against men as “a favoured method of interrogation” ⁶⁷. Government armed forces, the main opposition forces, and the state police all adopted action plans against conflict-related sexual violence, with support from the UN. This was positive, but the plans remained to be implemented, including through deterrent action against those committing sexual violence and commanders who encouraged or failed to prevent it. More broadly, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), including domestic violence, continued to undermine the rights of women and girls. UK programmes helped prevent or respond to SGBV, as well as support livelihood activities for women. During 2019, DFID (Department for International Development) provided £16.8 million for this work, as well as £2 million in funding for mental health and psychosocial support.

The arbitrary arrest and detention of individuals alleged to have criticised the government or key figures continued unabated. On the high-profile cases of Dong Samuel Luak, a human rights lawyer, and Aggrey Idri, a writer, who disappeared from Nairobi in 2017, the UN concluded it “highly probable” that they had been abducted and extra-judicially executed by the South Sudanese authorities ⁶⁸. The South Sudanese government failed to conduct a credible investigation.

South Sudan continued to apply the death penalty. In October, Amnesty International reported that 11 people had been executed in 2019, the highest since independence in 2011 ⁶⁹. This included the execution of a minor, who was 15 at the time of the alleged crime.

Lack of access to justice, and political interference in the judicial system, were major problems, as highlighted in an Amnesty International report released in October ⁷⁰. Recent initiatives, such as UN-supported mobile courts, had a positive impact, but were dwarfed by the scale of the problem. Parties failing to implement commitments on transitional justice and continued lack of accountability for conflict-related crimes increased the risk of perpetuating the problem. After years of conflict, South Sudan continued to be in urgent need of a comprehensive transitional justice process reflecting the interests of survivors.

Media censorship was entrenched and journalists self-censored their work. In 2019, journalists faced physical threats and intimidation, as well as seemingly arbitrary bureaucratic impediments. The UK supported media freedom in South Sudan, working with media and civil society representatives, and with the UN. In July, we hosted the Global Conference for Media Freedom in London, in which South Sudanese civil society representatives participated.

Food insecurity and malnutrition rates showed a deteriorating humanitarian situation with 1.7 million on the edge of famine by August ⁷¹. Unusually heavy rainfall and flooding affecting 908,000 people put already vulnerable communities at increased risk of famine in 2020 ⁷². The UK worked with partners to provide vital support to those affected. Bureaucratic impediments to humanitarian access continued. South Sudan remained one of the most dangerous operating environments for humanitarian workers in the world. In October, 3 International Organisation for Migration volunteers were killed in crossfire, and in December there were multiple armed attacks on humanitarian compounds in Maban in which 5 aid workers were assaulted.

6.23 Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

There was a deterioration in the overall human rights situation in Sri Lanka in 2019, with increased intercommunal tensions, violence against minority groups, and intimidation of human rights defenders. While Sri Lanka reaffirmed its commitment to post-conflict reconciliation and accountability through its co-sponsorship of UN Human Rights Council Resolution 40/1, delivery on this remained too slow. Controversial senior appointments called into question Sri Lanka’s commitment to human rights and reconciliation. Towards the end of 2019, there were reports of increased surveillance and intimidation of civil society groups and human rights defenders.

At the UN Human Rights Council (HRC (UN Human Rights Council)) in March, Sri Lanka co-sponsored Resolution 40/1, which gave Sri Lanka a further 2 years in which to implement in full the outstanding measures identified by the HRC (UN Human Rights Council) in Resolution 30/1. The UK welcomed this and the progress made to date, including the establishment of an Office of Missing Persons and the ratification of the Convention on Enforced Disappearances. However, more progress was needed on constitutional reform, the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms, and the replacement of the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

On Easter Sunday in April, 6 bomb attacks targeted churches and hotels across Sri Lanka. The attacks marked the largest number of deaths from terrorism in a single day in Sri Lanka’s long history of conflict. Those who suffered losses during the Easter Sunday attacks were paid compensation. There were reports that, given the scale of the attacks, a large number of people were arrested for alleged involvement in extremism. Although most were released on bail, a number remained on remand. Sri Lanka has a history of using open-ended periods of detention, largely against minority groups.

The aftermath of the attacks saw several incidents of violence against the Muslim community, including riots in which one man was killed and several mosques, homes and businesses were damaged, as well as further reports of intimidation and discrimination against Muslims, refugees, and asylum seekers. In May, the then President, Maithripala Sirisena, ordered the pardon of extremist monk Ven Galagodaaththe Gnanasara, the de facto leader of the extreme Buddhist Nationalist movement Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force), despite him being found in contempt of court. UK ministers raised the issue of minority rights with their Sri Lankan counterparts. The UK continued to support inter-religious dialogue and reconciliation through the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF (Conflict, Stability and Security Fund)) programme, including working with local organisations to encourage dialogue and the monitoring of incidents of violence and intimidation against members of religious minorities.

In June, the then President repeated his intention to end the country’s moratorium on the death penalty, and signed the warrants for 4 executions specifically for death row inmates who the state believed had been engaged in continued drug trafficking from within prison. On 5 July the Supreme Court issued an interim order halting executions until 30 October, following a number of petitions challenging President Sirisena’s decision. The interim order was extended to 10 December. The UK urged Sri Lanka to maintain the moratorium in an FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) statement in June, at the HRC (UN Human Rights Council), and through direct engagement.

In August, Sri Lanka’s cabinet approved a proposal to amend the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act. The proposal included amendments to the legal age for Muslim marriage, increasing it to 18. But there was no further legislative progress on the issue of child marriage in 2019.

In August, President Sirisena appointed Major General Shavendra Silva as the new army commander. The UK and other international partners expressed concern about the appointment given the allegations of serious human rights violations made against the division which Major General Silve had commanded at the end of the civil war. This appointment called into question Sri Lanka’s commitments made to the HRC (UN Human Rights Council) on justice and accountability. In response to the appointment, the UN Department of Peace Operations announced in September that it would suspend future deployments of Sri Lankan peacekeepers, except where suspension would expose UN operations to serious operational risk.

In October, Minister for South Asia and Human Rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, visited Sri Lanka. He underlined the importance of freedom of religion or belief, and reconciliation and accountability in his engagement with ministers and the then President. Lord Ahmad met faith leaders and civil society groups working on reconciliation and inter-communal relations.

In November’s presidential elections, former Defence Secretary, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, won 52% of the vote on an 83% turnout. An EU observer mission concluded in its interim report that the 2019 presidential elections were free, fair, and largely trouble free. However, unregulated campaign spending, abuse of state resources, and media bias affected the level playing field. The media and information environment in the lead-up to the elections was characterised by misinformation, partisan media, and online hate-speech. Some journalists were subjected to searches, interrogation, and intimidation after the elections.

In November, the new government reassigned key police officers who had been investigating alleged human rights violations and abuses, and related crimes. It announced its intention to establish a Special Presidential Commission to investigate the activities of the police. Towards the end of 2019, there were multiple reports of increased surveillance and intimidation of activists, particularly those working on legal and transitional justice issues.

6.24 Sudan

2019 was a year of significant change in Sudan. A mass protest movement led to the end of President Bashir’s 30-year rule and to the establishment of a civilian-led transitional government, whose objective was to pave the way for democracy. The human rights situation was mixed. Serious human rights violations accompanied the period of protest in the first half of the year, including the violent dispersal of peaceful protesters on 3 June. After the appointment of the transitional government in August, some positive initial steps were taken, but long-standing human rights issues and concerns remained, including restrictions on the media, freedom of religion or belief, and women’s rights. The most notable changes in the Government of Sudan’s approach were the commitment to open an Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (with field offices) in the country, the establishment of a commission of inquiry into violence against protesters, and the decision to repeal public order laws.

UK project funding in 2019 included capacity building to improve the Sudanese parliament’s legislative scrutiny with regard to human rights. We also worked with the Government of Sudan to agree a constructive resolution on Sudan at the UN Human Rights Council in September.

Freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly were key concerns in the first half of 2019, with the security services using lethal force to disperse those peacefully protesting in favour of political change. There were reports of over 100 deaths ²³, numerous casualties, arbitrary detentions, the use of torture, attacks on medical professionals, and sexual assaults throughout this period. The UK lobbied extensively, sending strong public messages and appealing directly to the Sudanese government to condemn the use of brutal force. After the crackdown on protestors on 3 June, the then Minister for Africa, Harriett Baldwin, summoned the Sudanese Ambassador to register the strength of UK concern.

Women played a significant role in the protest movement, and the civilian government made commitments to ensure their continued role during the transition period. The UK welcomed the decision to repeal public order laws, which had long been used by the authorities to violate human rights, specifically those of women. There was long-standing concern about sexual and gender-based violence in Sudan, with the issue often being overlooked or denied. Through project funding the UK worked on preventing such violence, along with the promotion of women’s rights, tackling stigma and improving the support available to victims.

There were positive developments with regard to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief)) in Sudan, with a UK co-hosted event in Khartoum leading to the lifting of restrictions on the opening hours of Christian schools in January. Later in the year, the new Sudanese Prime Minister, Abdalla Hamdok, issued a decree allowing employees of public institutions to leave work on Sundays to attend church, and declaring Christmas Day a national holiday for the first time in a decade. However, there were still causes for concern, with legislative hurdles for the operation of non-Muslim religious buildings, which resulted in the prosecution of members of minority groups, including of 8 church leaders who faced charges of trespass during 2019. At the end of the year, the UK was concerned by reports that 3 churches in Blue Nile State had been burned down. Through project work, the UK worked to strengthen the effectiveness of the National Assembly in developing policies that better serve minority religious groups, and to ensure that Sudanese policies and legislation regarding FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief) are brought in line with international standards.

During the period of popular protests in 2019, there were particularly harsh restrictions on the media, including newspaper seizures, incidents of harassment towards journalists, and disruption to internet access across Khartoum. The British Ambassador and the then Minister for Africa, Harriett Baldwin, raised the latter directly with the Sudanese authorities. There was greater media freedom after the removal of Bashir, and it was clear that media reform would be vital in order to support and foster Sudan’s democratic transition. The UK welcomed the agreement to restore the BBC’s broadcasting licence and Prime Minister Hamdok’s commitments during the UK-hosted Media Freedom event in the margins of the UN General Assembly in September. However, long-standing issues remained. The UK funded a project to build capacity for journalists and to develop a media reform roadmap to feed into the National Action Plan.

The human rights situation in Sudan’s conflict areas remained of particular concern, with preventing sexual violence a key UK focus. The UK worked with partners to strengthen the prevention and response to conflict-related sexual violence, as well as to eliminate the stigma suffered by survivors in highly impacted areas in Darfur. The UK welcomed the signing of declarations in Juba to resume peace talks, and continued to urge the Sudanese Government and armed groups to engage productively in these discussions to encourage progress.

6.25 Syria

The human rights situation in Syria continued to be appalling in 2019. Arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, torture, sexual violence, and severe restrictions on civil and political rights, including media freedoms, remained widespread. The Syrian regime was the main perpetrator of these violations, but abuses were also committed by proscribed terrorist organisations and by other armed groups. The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI) stated in September that “gender roles, and the inequalities that underpin them, have fuelled and amplified the impact of these violations.”

In April, the Syrian regime, backed by Russia, launched an offensive on areas in north-west Syria held by armed opposition and extremist groups. After late April, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) verified more than 1,000 civilian casualties, hundreds of them children, and the displacement of 630,000 civilians, the vast majority being women and children. Following numerous and repeated attacks on medical facilities, the COI stated that such attacks might amount to war crimes. After lobbying from the UK and other countries, the UN Secretary-General announced the establishment of a Board of Inquiry to investigate these attacks against UN-supported facilities not involved in the conflict. The Board subsequently found it ‘highly probable’ that the Assad regime and its allies had attacked a school and multiple hospitals. The COI also documented indiscriminate attacks by proscribed terrorist group Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and armed opposition group Jaysh al-Izza, which had killed and maimed dozens of civilians in rural Aleppo and Hama. The COI stated that there were reasonable grounds to believe that these 2 groups had committed war crimes.

In regime-controlled areas, human rights violations remain widespread. Arbitrary detention, torture of detainees, and enforced disappearances were pervasive in both ‘reconciled’ and ‘loyalist’ areas ²⁴. Over 1,700 cases of arbitrary arrests were documented in the first half of 2019 by the Syrian Network for Human Rights. In its September report, the COI stated that sexual violence continued to occur and that it was investigating alleged reports of attacks against

civilians. Human rights organisations have conveyed consistent assertions of mass executions of political prisoners at Saydnaya prison. In August, the UK raised these issues in a UN Security Council session on detainees and missing persons in Syria. Although some prisoner exchanges were facilitated by the Astana Working Group, these were of a small scale compared with the number of political detainees.

Freedom of expression was severely curtailed. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 7 journalists were killed in 2019. Since the start of the conflict, CPJ estimate that 134 journalists have been killed, with 22 cases remaining unresolved since 2012.

There was no substantive progress on the rights of women and girls. To help mitigate the significant impact of the conflict on women and girls, in 2019 the UK supported female-run centres providing basic medical and psychological care to women and girls in Idlib, reaching around 36,000. We also supported education services for at least 201,000 Syrian girls.

Violations of housing, land, and property rights have increased, undermining prospects for the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of refugees and internally displaced people. According to the COI, state institutions unlawfully confiscated and destroyed the property of residents of former opposition areas and families of suspected ‘terrorists’ in what appears to amount to collective punishment.

Turkey’s incursion into north-east Syria in October resulted in the displacement of over 200,000 people, and significantly worsened the humanitarian situation across the area. The Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, raised concerns with their Turkish counterparts and called for a ceasefire. Human rights organisations raised a number of abuses reportedly carried out by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army militia group, including indiscriminate shelling of civilians in residential areas, the seizure of homes of local Kurds, and summary executions, for example of the Kurdish politician, Hevrin Khalaf. The Defence Ministry of the Turkish-supported Syrian Interim Government established a committee to investigate alleged abuses. Turkey claimed that Kurdish forces had carried out a series of indiscriminate bombings with improvised explosives, in Turkish-controlled areas in northern Syria, causing civilian casualties. The OHCHR and COI began an investigation into the claims.

The UK continued to support accountability efforts towards prosecuting perpetrators of human rights and international humanitarian law violations. We funded training for doctors to produce forensic medical reports, which could act as court-standard evidence of sexual violence. We supported work by the International Commission on Missing Persons to identify remains in mass graves in north-east Syria to provide closure to families of the deceased, and support accountability for Daesh crimes. At the UN we have supported efforts to ensure that the UN International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) is placed on the UN regular budget to guarantee that the IIIM has continued sustainable funding to fulfil its mandate of investigating the most serious human rights violations and abuses committed during the conflict. In 2019, the UK provided £775,000 to the IIIM to continue its work. The UK also sustained diplomatic pressure including through our leadership on the Syria resolution at the UN Human Rights Council ([HRC \(UN Human Rights Council\)](#)).

6.26 Turkmenistan

The human rights situation in Turkmenistan in 2019 remained a cause for concern. The principal issues were continuing allegations of torture and poor prison conditions, restrictions on freedom of expression and on freedom of religion or belief, gender discrimination, and restrictions on LGBT rights. There was little evidence of progress on the range of Universal Periodic Review (UPR) recommendations that Turkmenistan accepted in 2018, although Turkmenistan worked with the UN on a partnership agreement, which includes a rule of law and human rights element. Most human rights defenders still worked outside the country.

The EU expressed concerns over reports of the continuing incommunicado detention of victims of enforced disappearances, including those detained since the attempted coup against former President Niyazov in 2002. In response, Turkmenistan stated that it was cooperating with the relevant UN bodies and the EU, had provided information on several cases, and expressed its readiness to continue dialogue. Turkmenistan accepted the UK’s 2018 UPR recommendation to sign the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT), but took no action to put this commitment into effect.

Media freedom remained severely curtailed. The media in Turkmenistan remained under state control, and foreign publications were prohibited. Most social media and many internet sites remained blocked. Reporters Without Borders ranked Turkmenistan last of the 180 countries in its coverage, while Freedom House ranked it joint 198th (with DPRK) out of 199 countries. The lack of independent media within Turkmenistan, the blocking of social media, and the fact that any protests or demonstrations were not tolerated by the authorities meant that freedom of expression continued to be severely restricted.

In 2019, there were fewer reports compared with previous years of state employees being forced to pick cotton to meet quotas set by the state. In a positive move, Turkmenistan agreed to the 2018 UPR recommendation to work in partnership with the International Labour Organisation to eliminate the use of forced labour in the cotton harvest. Turkmenistan began to mechanise its cotton harvest, investing in a contract with an overseas supplier to purchase a large number of harvesters, which could lead to a reduction in the use of forced labour.

In 2019, there were further reports that Turkmenistan had imprisoned a number of conscientious objectors to military service, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, with no alternative to military service available. The prison sentences are generally for 2 years. It continued to prove difficult to register, or re-register, a religious organisation in Turkmenistan.

Restrictions on freedom of movement remained a concern. A new law drastically reduced the number of state-approved foreign universities, meaning that Turkmen students studying in non-approved universities would no longer be able to receive financial support for study from their families, and might face problems with immigration authorities on return to Turkmenistan. Reports continued of young Turkmen being prevented from travelling abroad by the authorities.

In 2019, the Embassy used project funding to: support an International Organization for Migration project to raise the capacity of Turkmen media to cover counter human-trafficking issues; fund a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) project to promote employment opportunities for people with disabilities; support the UNDP in assisting Turkmenistan to implement its National Human Rights Action Plan (2016-20), including enhancing the capacity of the Ombudsperson’s Office; fund a UNFPA project to conduct the first national survey of domestic violence; and support the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in helping to promote gender mainstreaming in the security sectors. In August, the then FCO (Foreign & Commonwealth Office) Minister for Europe, Christopher Pincher, raised the importance of respect for human rights in a letter to Turkmen Foreign Minister, Rasit Meredov.

6.27 Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan continued to take positive steps to improve the human rights situation, particularly in the area of media freedom, with the President calling publicly for further progress. The government engaged with international human rights organisations, including Human Rights Watch, and the UN. The main concerns remained restrictions on civil society, constraints on the independence of the judiciary, discrimination against LGBT people, and increasing control over religious activity.

Uzbekistan has made significant, positive reforms with regard to free speech and freedom of the press. Websites such as Facebook and YouTube are no longer blocked. The BBC and other international media outlets were granted formal accreditation in June. Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov led a large delegation to London for the Global Conference for Media Freedom in July. However, Uzbekistan has not signed the Global Media Freedom Pledge. Self-censorship among journalists and unofficial pressure at the local level remained widespread. While the authorities improved the process for NGO (Non Governmental Organisations) registration by making registration forms mostly available online, registration remained difficult, with concerns including the high cost and lack of transparent decision making.

The government continued to reform the judiciary and the criminal justice sector, engaging with and supported by international partners. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, Diego García-Sayán, visited in September. In August, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a decree, following recommendations in Uzbekistan’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in May 2018, formally announcing the closure of Jaslyk prison, which had been notorious for its association with torture. The positive trend from 2018 of judges dismissing cases which lacked evidence, or which included evidence from or of torture, continued. However, the implementation of presidential decrees, in general, remained an issue, with reports that authorities, particularly at the local level, did not adhere to these decrees effectively or evenly. Loopholes and weaknesses still allowed corrupt individuals to exert influence at the local level. The UN Committee against Torture noted in November that, despite an increase in reports of torture, the number of investigations into such reports remained low and that the number of prosecutions for the use of torture had decreased in 2018 and 2019. The General Prosecutor’s Office (GPO) continued to hold significant power and influence in court cases, and there were continued reports that the judiciary was subject to pressure from local authorities. There were also reports of cases where individuals had been denied due process, access to lawyers, or medical treatment.

Uzbekistan allowed the practice of all major religions, which are protected by law. 2019 did not see the raids and arrests reported in 2018, but there were an increasing number of instances of anti-religious rhetoric, focused particularly on Islamic practise. Some men had their beards forcibly shaved, and some women were removed from higher education classes and told to remove their headscarves. Anecdotal reports also indicated that unofficial pressure was being placed on Imams about the content of their sermons.

Uzbekistan made further progress in 2019 in reducing forced labour during the cotton harvest. Forced labour was now the exception not the rule. Wages for cotton pickers were increased and exempted from tax, and the fines for those using forced labour were raised again. The government announced plans to make using forced labour a criminal, as opposed to civil, offence. In addition, Uzbekistan announced long-term plans for some mechanisation of the harvest, and the removal of cotton quotas, to reduce the need for any forced labour.

Same sex relationships remained illegal, and 2 individuals were arrested early in 2019 with few details given about their cases. Uzbekistan rejected the relevant recommendations on LGBT rights contained in the UPR in May 2018, and LGBT people continued to face significant discrimination and ill-treatment during 2019.

During 2019, the UK supported training relating to the work of journalists, press freedom, and wider governance and rule of law reforms. This included a project on enhancing the capacity of state bodies to strengthen the compliance of national legislation and law enforcement practices with international human rights treaties, and to ensure fulfilment of international human rights obligations.

6.28 Venezuela

Nicolás Maduro was sworn in for a new presidential term in January following elections, which the UK described as deeply flawed, as did the EU, the regional Lima Group, and other international partners. Throughout the year, democracy and the independence of democratic institutions was further eroded. President of the National Assembly Juan Guaidó assumed the interim presidency of Venezuela in accordance with the Venezuelan Constitution and was recognised by the UK ²³ and over 50 international partners until the staging of credible presidential elections.

Throughout 2019, the Maduro regime used the Venezuelan state apparatus to coerce, repress, intimidate, detain, and torture, as reported by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Maduro’s regime stripped 29 parliamentarians of their immunity without due process ²⁴. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention particularly highlighted the case of the MP, Juan Requesens, who continued to be detained arbitrarily after 16 months without trial.

On 5 July, after she visited Venezuela, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, issued a comprehensive report ²⁵ that documented 6,000 alleged extrajudicial killings between January 2018 and May 2019 by police death squads, and recommended that the Special Action Forces of the Bolivarian National Police (FAES) be dissolved. In July alone, FAES was responsible for killing 57 people. In an update by the OHCHR in September, FAES was reported still to be receiving high-level support.

In September, an OHCHR office was established in Caracas with the UK’s support, to document human rights violations and engage the authorities in monitoring human rights commitments, including within the Orinoco Mining region where serious human rights violations and abuses had occurred.

According to reports by Project SOSOrinoco and Reuters, in February state security forces killed 7 people in Santa Elena de Uairén and other centres of indigenous people located near the border with Brazil. In September, an Inter-American Commission of Human Rights report documented indigenous communities affected by mercury poisoning, displacement, and violence due to illegal mining and organised crime.

In September, the UN Human Rights Council issued 2 resolutions on Venezuela. The first strengthened the mandate of the OHCHR office in Caracas through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the OHCHR and the Maduro regime. The MoU established a framework for future discussion and cooperation, and provided for an ongoing presence in the country through a team of 2 UN human rights officers. The second established an independent international fact-finding mission (FFM) to investigate extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detentions, and torture since 2014. The Maduro regime refused to co-operate with the FFM; consequently, it set up its base in Panama. Also in September, the UK ²⁶ joined France and Germany in supporting the referral by Argentina, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Paraguay of the situation in Venezuela to the International Criminal Court (ICC) ²⁷.

Media freedom continued to be suppressed by Maduro’s regime. On 19 November, military forces raided the headquarters of an online media outlet and arrested the operations manager ²⁸. The Venezuelan Press Workers’ Union reported that over 115 media outlets had closed since 2013.

The humanitarian emergency for which the regime in Venezuela was responsible continued to worsen. The UN estimated that 7 million people urgently needed humanitarian assistance in a country where the economy had more than halved in size since 2013. The FAO reported an increase in undernourishment to 21%, equivalent to 6.8 million people. In UNICEF screenings in 13 states, 5.3% of children under 5 presented global acute malnutrition. Instances of treatable and vector-borne diseases increased. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) reported more than 200,000 malaria cases (as of June), an ongoing measles outbreak, and a rise in diphtheria deaths and sickness.

The number of Venezuelans fleeing the humanitarian, political, and economic crisis reached an estimated 4.8 million ²⁹. The UN estimated that the total number of refugees fleeing Venezuela would increase to as many as 6.5 million in 2020.

In September, DFID (Department for International Development) announced a new £30 million aid commitment, bringing the total UK contribution to £44.5 million ³⁰. The UN’s Humanitarian Response Plan for 2019, which set out assistance required for Venezuela, raised only 33% of the \$223 million goal; the UK was the fifth biggest donor. For 2020, the United Nations has launched a \$750 million call for Venezuela, and a \$1.35 billion call to manage the impact of the crisis on the wider region.

The UK remained committed to the restoration of democracy in Venezuela and throughout 2019 encouraged negotiations that would lead to credible, free, and fair elections. In a shrinking democratic space, the UK supported projects designed to help create opportunities for MPs to work with civil society and to remove institutional and political barriers to the delivery of aid. Most international NGOs were prevented from working in Venezuela, and national NGOs had little experience of working with international partners. During 2019, the UK supported journalists and human rights defenders by providing access to international protection mechanisms and delivering training to document rights violations. The UK supported civil society efforts to tackle corruption, and projects to educate girls, reduce teenage pregnancy, and tackle modern slavery.

6.29 Yemen

The human rights situation in Yemen remained dire, in the fifth year of the conflict. Despite some reductions in hostilities, conflict continued and caused widespread hardship for civilians. The UN Civilian Impact Monitoring Project recorded over 2,700 civilian casualties by the end of October, while The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project reported that over 100,000 people had been killed since 2014, including 12,000 civilians. The UN also reported widespread damage to infrastructure including hospitals, schools, and water systems. The International Organization for Migration estimated that more than 3.6 million people have been forced to flee their homes since 2014, including 385,600 in 2019.

There were widespread reports of human rights violations and abuses by all parties to the conflict during 2019. These included continued attacks on freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression, and women’s rights, sexual violence, impediments to humanitarian access and to the enjoyment of social and economic rights, as well as the recruitment of child soldiers, arbitrary detention, torture, and ill-treatment. The UK continued to take allegations of violations of international humanitarian law relating to Coalition airstrikes in Yemen extremely seriously, and to monitor incidents of concern closely.

The UK worked with all parties to find a political solution to the conflict. A political settlement remained indispensable for creating the conditions for the legitimate government to improve its capacity to protect human rights, and for the humanitarian crisis to be addressed properly. The UK directly supported the UN-led peace process by embedding technical experts within the UN Special Envoy’s Office, and by contributing towards the implementation of the outcomes of the process.

The UK provided £200 million in response to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen for the financial year, 2019 to 2020, bringing our total commitment to £770 million since the conflict began. Our support provided vital food assistance to those most at risk of dying from starvation and disease, meeting the immediate food needs of more than 1 million people each month, and providing over one million people with improved water supply and sanitation.

The UK also supports the UN Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen, and voted in favour of the renewal of the Group’s mandate in the UN Human Rights Council in September. In early 2019, the UK worked with Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to increase the technical expertise of field monitors from the independent Yemeni National Commission of Inquiry to identify breaches of international human rights law, with a focus on conflict-related gender-based violence. Following the National Commission’s publication of their sixth biannual report, the UK is pressing the Government of Yemen to implement its conclusions, such as re-establishing the Ministry of Human Rights.

Yemen ranked last out of 144 countries on the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index. The incidence of gender-based violence had risen by 70% ⁸³ since the start of the conflict in 2015. Women and girls continued to bear a disproportionate share of the hardship caused by protracted displacement.

The UK provided emergency cash assistance for vulnerable displaced women and female-headed-households, to enable them to access sexual and gender-based violence services, medical assistance, and psychosocial support. The UK also recognised the important role women must play in ending the conflict, and continued to support the Yemeni Women’s Pact for Peace and Security through UN Women to promote the participation of women in the peace process. Through contributions to the UN’s Peace Support Project, the UK also funded a gender adviser within the Special Envoy’s office, ensuring that gender perspectives were reflected in agreements reached between the conflict parties. The UK’s commitment to the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Yemen extended down to the grassroots level, where we supported local women civil society organisations to engage in peacebuilding and promote gender equality.

Consensual sexual relations between people of the same sex remained illegal in Yemen, and were subject to the death penalty in some cases.

The UK continued to be committed to ending the use of child soldiers and protecting children in armed conflict. We condemned in the strongest terms the abuses committed against children in Yemen, and urged all parties to the conflict to uphold international law. In June the UN Secretary-General released a report ⁸⁴ on children and armed conflict in Yemen, which showed that 3,034 children had been recruited into armed forces between 1 April 2013 and 31 December 2018. This was in addition to the children who had been killed, detained, injured, or abused, been subjected to sexual violence or forced marriage, or who had suffered from a lack of healthcare, food, and education.

Freedom of religion or belief was widely denied in 2019. The Baha’i religious minority were the most visibly persecuted. There were cases of arbitrary detentions and the abuse of Baha’i detainees, including of Hamed bin Haydara, who was given a death sentence in 2018. We worked closely with our partners to raise these concerns directly with the Houthi authorities, and urged the release of detained individuals. We continued to follow the treatment of the Baha’is in Yemen closely, including through meeting their representatives in the UK.

In July, Amnesty International reported ⁸⁵ that the Houthis had sentenced 30 people to death – a mix of academics, students, and politicians, including linguistics professor, Youssef al-Bawab, who had been detained since late 2016. An appeal was launched against the sentences. The UK will continue to work with international partners to put an end to arbitrary detentions and use of the death penalty.

6.30 Zimbabwe

The human rights situation in Zimbabwe deteriorated in 2019. The human rights monitoring group, Zimbabwe Peace Project, recorded 2,761 human rights violations in the course of the year. This was more than a 10% increase on their figures for 2018. The majority of these violations were associated with the response by the security services to fuel protests in January. The crackdown and aftermath resulted in the deaths of 17 people, 17 reports of rape, 586 reports of assault, and 81 reported injuries by gunfire, violence for which no one has been held accountable. In addition, the Zimbabwean government had yet to fulfil its commitment to implement in a meaningful way the Commission of Inquiry’s recommendations following the violence on 1 August 2018, when members of the Zimbabwean Armed Forces opened fire on protesters killing 6 and injuring many more. The Commission made 24 recommendations, including that the police urgently complete their investigations to enable the prosecution of those responsible for all alleged crimes committed.

2019 witnessed backsliding on political freedoms in Zimbabwe. Using legislation, the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) issued prohibition orders against demonstrations by the opposition and by some civil society and teachers’ groups. Where protests went ahead, the ZRP responded heavy-handedly, including with beatings. The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO (Non Governmental Organisations) Forum reported 67 abductions, including of doctors, artists and civil society activists, and 21 civil society and opposition activists were charged with subversion on unclear grounds. None of the trials of the arrested activists had begun by the end of the year. In November, the Zimbabwean government replaced the repressive ‘Public Order and Security Act’ with the ‘Maintenance of Peace and Order Bill’. This change was an improvement in some respects, particularly the requirement for presidential assent before the army could be deployed to quell disorder. However, we had yet to see meaningful implementation of the new legislation.

Media freedom in Zimbabwe remained severely limited. While citizens expressed their opinions openly in a vibrant social media space, TV and radio remained tightly controlled by the state and biased in favour of the ruling party. There continued to be reports of journalists being targeted by the state, especially those covering political demonstrations. The Media Institute of Southern Africa reported 18 incidences of violence against journalists by state actors in 2019. Following the January protests, in an unprecedented move, the Zimbabwean government shut down the internet for 6 days. Proposed legislation to replace the restrictive Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act and Broadcasting Services Act was welcome, but with the degree of improvement it would engender dependant on its detail, and implementation.

The deterioration of the Zimbabwean economy heavily affected the delivery of basic services such as clean water, healthcare, and education. According to the UN World Food Programme, it was expected that half the population would require food assistance in the first 3 months of 2020. In response, DFID (Department for International Development) committed £49 million to the humanitarian response to provide urgent cash and food assistance, and £5 million to UNICEF for cholera prevention and emergency response. School attendance continued to deteriorate in Zimbabwe as the economic situation impacted on school feeding programs, parents’ ability to pay fees, and the value of teachers’ salaries. Access to safe drinking water and sanitation was not fully met. The health sector struggled with the withdrawal of labour by doctors in the face of rapidly diminishing salaries, and the failure of government to secure sufficient imports of essential drugs.

Zimbabwe experienced high rates of gender-based violence. There were reports of physical and sexual violence against women perpetrated by the security forces, particularly during the protests in January, and when the security forces were deployed in response to Cyclone Idai in March. To help prevent and respond to the most severe types of gender-based violence, DFID (Department for International Development) launched a new £12 million Stopping Abuse and Female Exploitation Programme in Zimbabwe in April.

Some LGBT groups in Zimbabwe reported feeling less persecuted than they had been when Robert Mugabe was in power. However, LGBT individuals continued to face discrimination, family disownment, and displacement from lodgings, unfair labour practices, blackmail, and bullying.

The UK remained at the forefront of engagement with the Zimbabwean government on advancing citizens’ access to their rights. We continued to meet persecuted activists, pro-democracy campaigners, parliamentarians, and political leaders from across the political spectrum to encourage engagement, dialogue, and a more open society, with the rights of all Zimbabweans respected.

In 2019, the UK continued to support a multi-donor programme to improve access to justice, promote media freedom, support education for the most marginalised children, including girls and children with disabilities, and improve access to civil and political rights, including through public education. We welcomed the Zimbabwean Foreign Minister, Sibusiso Moyo, at the Global Conference for Media Freedom in London in July, and urged Zimbabwe to enact policies in compliance with the Global Pledge on Media Freedom.

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53. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/01/iran-2-child-offenders-executed> [↗](#)
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62. <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/un-report-urges-accountability-libya-airstrike-deaths> [↗](#)
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73. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/sudan-protests-sunday-mark-30-years-bashir-seized-power> [↗](#)
74. ‘Reconciled’ refers to areas retaken by the Syrian regime from the opposition through negotiated surrender agreements. ‘Loyalist’ areas refer to those territories that remained under the control of the Assad regime throughout the conflict [↗](#)

75. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-recognises-juan-guaido-as-interim-president-of-venezuela> ↵
76. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-office-statement-on-the-situation-in-venezuela> ↵
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78. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-welcomes-new-sanctions-against-maduro-regime> ↵
79. https://www.icc-cpi.int/itemsDocuments/180925-otp-referral-venezuela_ENG.pdf ↵
80. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25438&LangID=E> ↵
81. <https://r4v.info/es/situations/platform> ↵
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83. <https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/publications/no-future-for-yemen-without-women-and-girls> ↵
84. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2019_453.pdf ↵
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Annual report on human rights
in selected countries in 2019 (see
Chapter 4 for individual country
chapters)

Countries:

Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh,
Burundi, Central African Republic,
China, Colombia, Congo,
Democratic Republic, Egypt,
Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Israel, 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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