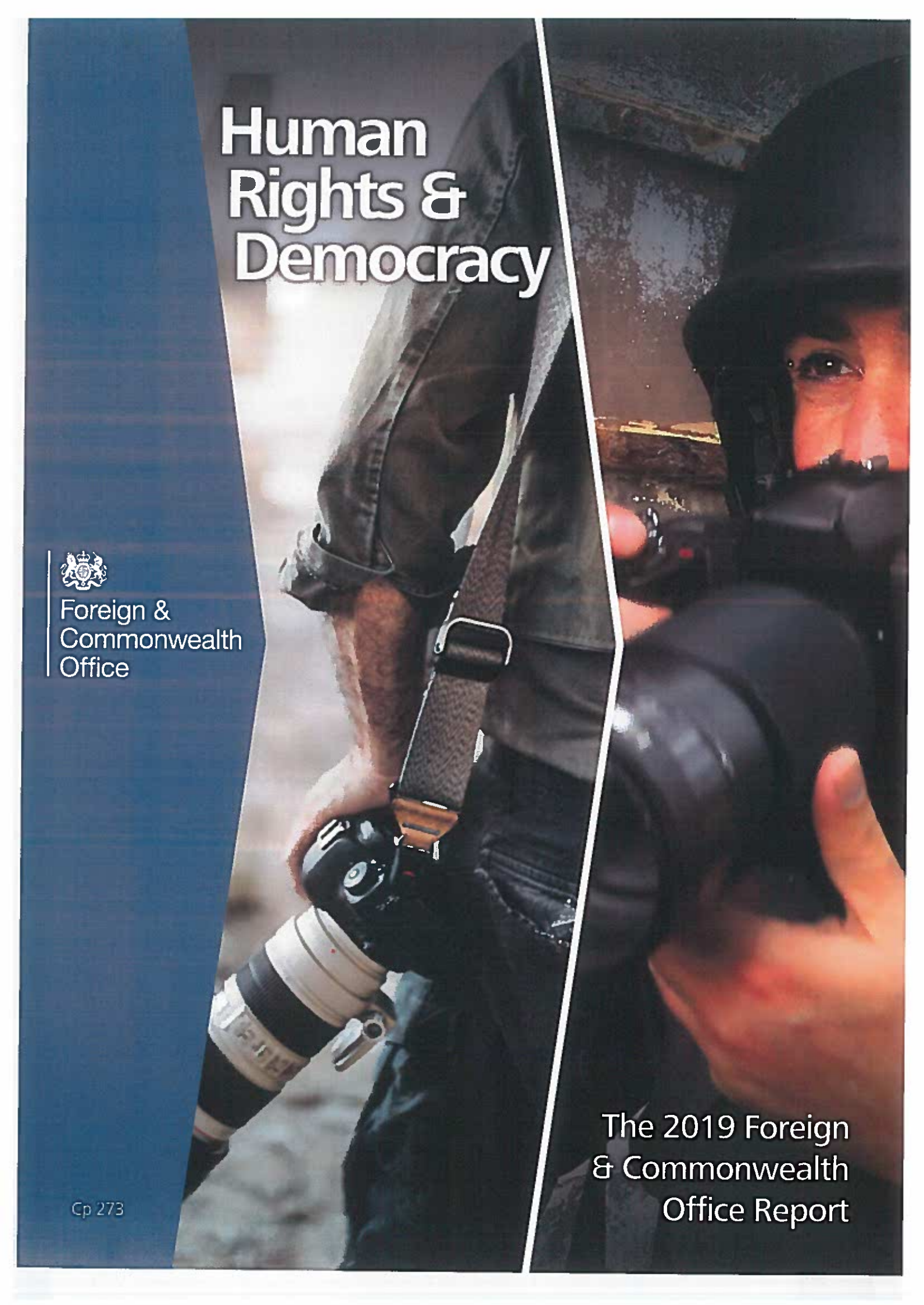


Human Rights & Democracy



Foreign &
Commonwealth
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The 2019 Foreign
& Commonwealth
Office Report



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The 2019 Foreign & Commonwealth Office Report

Presented to Parliament

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by Command of Her Majesty

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million^[50]. 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.

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 2019/20, 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 one 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%^[51] 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

[50] <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-uk-aid-support-for-venezuelans-in-desperate-needs>

[51] <https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/publications/no-future-for-yemen-without-women-and-girls>

a report^[52] 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^[53] 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.

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 six 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 heavily-handedly, including with beatings. The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO 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 six 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 three months of 2020. In response, DFID 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 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'

[52] https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2019_453.pdf

[53] <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/07/yemen-houthi-run-court-sentences-30-political-opposition-figures-to-death-following-sham-trial>