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Corporate report

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

Published 8 July 2021

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Play time in a primary school in Pakistan. Play is an important part of a child's early development helping to mature their language and communication skills. In 2020, the UK worked closely with Pakistan to further access to education and realise gender equality.

Preface by the Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



The Government's [Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>) – our vision for Global Britain – places a major focus on championing human rights, democratic values, good governance, the rule of law, and open societies. This is central to our role as

a force for good in the world.

This F.C.D.O. Annual Human Rights & Democracy Report looks at the human rights situation around the world in 2020. It demonstrates how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many human rights issues, and disproportionately impacted marginalised and vulnerable groups. It highlights some of the actions we have taken, as a government and with our partners, bilaterally and in multilateral fora, in support of human rights and those who defend them.

This is the first report published by the new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. It therefore reflects the importance and strength of diplomacy and development working side-by-side to defend human rights and democracy around the world.

The 2020 report covers 31 Human Rights Priority Countries. The list is reviewed periodically, taking into account the human rights situation, the trajectory of change, and the UK's ability to make a positive difference in each country. This year, Burundi and Republic of Maldives have been removed from the list, while Belarus, Mali and Nicaragua have been added.

There is no doubt that 2020 was a difficult year. The pandemic has strengthened the arm of authoritarian rulers and we've tragically witnessed a scaling up of egregious abuse of human rights. For those courageous and brave souls who call out such abuses, including human rights defenders, it has made their crucial role both more important and more difficult, as they seek to defend and promote the rights of minority groups or indeed document violations or champion reform. The F.C.D.O. continued to support human rights defenders in 2020, including by monitoring cases, observing trials, and raising issues with host governments, for example in Iran, Colombia, Turkey and Thailand.

The report covers many of the issues on which we are most active. A free and fearless objective media is vital for accountability in all parts of our lives. Supporting press freedom and journalists has continued to be a major priority for this government.

Several new countries joined our Media Freedom Coalition in 2020, swelling the alliance to 42 states, including all G7 countries. Our High Level Panel of Legal Experts industriously worked on ways to improve legal protections for journalists and independent media. We continued to be the lead contributor to the UNESCO Global Media Defence Fund. Moreover, our programme to strengthen media standards and protections continued to deliver results, for example in Ethiopia, Bangladesh and Sierra Leone.

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) has been another priority throughout the year. The report details how we have built new like-minded alliances and strengthened existing ones. In December, the Prime Minister appointed Fiona Bruce as his new envoy on FoRB.

Violations against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang have also been in sharp focus. In June, the UK delivered a ground-breaking joint statement at the Human Rights Council on behalf of 28 countries, urging China to allow access for independent observers, including the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. We continue to call for this access as a matter of great urgency.

Studies show that the pandemic has brought disproportionately heavy consequences for women and girls. To counter the surge in violence against women during 2020, we funded programmes in Kenya, Nepal and across the Western Balkans to make sure victims of violence could access help and refuge during the pandemic. We also kick-started a global follow-up programme to our highly successful 'What Works to Prevent Violence' initiative.

In July, seven years of UK support to the Sudanese-led movement bore fruit, when the Sudanese Government outlawed female genital mutilation. In October, to rally international support for girls' education, we developed two new targets for low and middle income countries to meet by 2025: to get 40 million more girls into primary and secondary school; and to get a third more girls reading by the age of ten. All G7 countries have now signed up to these targets.

We have continued to make good progress on our Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative. In June, I was part of the launch of the UK-backed Murad Code for global consultations. It will strengthen work with survivors to investigate, document and record crimes. In November, I launched the 'Declaration of Humanity' and, through it, successfully encouraged faith, belief and community leaders to speak out on the issue and denounce the stigma faced by survivors of sexual violence.

Earlier and most notably in July, the Foreign Secretary introduced our new Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime – a powerful new tool of deterrence and accountability – and immediately imposed sanctions against 49 individuals or entities involved in a range of human rights violations and abuses around the world.

Human rights issues connect to many other areas of policy. For example, when making decisions on trading relations, our international obligations and commitments, including on human rights, are always of paramount importance. We believe that political freedom and the rule of law are vital underpinnings for both long term prosperity and stability.

I am proud of our record on human rights, but this area of our work will always need to be sustained as a priority as there remains so much more to be done. With the UK successfully re-elected to the UN Human Rights Council for the 2021-23 term, we are well positioned to keep pursuing this work and strengthening alliances to stand up for the persecuted and oppressed. We are committed to continue supporting vital programmes, and working with our partners to defend and promote human rights around the world. Simply put it's the right thing to do.

Chapter 1: Human rights and democracy priority themes

Democracy and democratic freedoms

Promoting democracy and defending democratic freedoms are fundamental to the UK's foreign policy. We believe that strong democratic institutions and accountable governments, which uphold universal rights and the rule of law, are key building blocks for secure and prosperous states.

We witnessed a number of challenges to democracy in the world in 2020 exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. There was further evidence of the retreat of democracy and a rise in authoritarianism. In 2020, the N.G.O Freedom House recorded a decline in global freedom for the 15th consecutive year.^[footnote 1] COVID-19 brought the interdependence of democracy and human rights into even sharper focus, with governments using the crisis to restrict civil liberties further and to entrench repressive measures.

The UK continued to defend democracy through support to electoral processes. In 2020, the UK funded observers to election observation missions run by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In Georgia, we funded three long-term observers to parliamentary elections in November; in Moldova we funded two long-term observers to presidential elections in November; and eight to Ukraine to observe the local elections in October. Through our Embassies and High Commissions, the UK continued to support democratic political institutions and promote good governance. In Nigeria, the UK funded and supported Nigerian civil society groups to observe voting during elections in Edo and Ondo states. The UK played a leading role, working with partners in the international community, to help ensure credible elections in Guyana in March.

Westminster Foundation for Democracy

The Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is an executive Non-Departmental Public Body focused on supporting democracy overseas. It is an important and distinctive part of the UK's diplomatic and soft power efforts. We continued to work closely with WFD during 2020, and funded their work to bolster and strengthen human rights by making countries' political systems fairer, more inclusive, and more accountable.

Working closely with partners, WFD helped parliaments operate effectively during lockdowns, scrutinised government responses, and ensured oversight of emergency spending. Ensuring that COVID-related laws and policies were gender-sensitive was a key goal in WFD programmes, for example in Morocco and Malaysia.



Hon. Timothy Amwayi, Member of Kakamega County Assembly, Kenya, speaks at the Commonwealth Partnership for Democracy (CP4D) closing conference, which was held in London on 4 March 2020. Copyright Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD).

WFD helped young people get involved in politics in Nigeria^[footnote 2], Uganda^[footnote 3], North Macedonia^[footnote 4] and Bosnia and Herzegovina^[footnote 5]. They worked with the parliament in Sierra Leone^[footnote 6] to submit its first report on implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the parliament of North Macedonia to adopt the Declaration for Active Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities. In The Gambia, WFD facilitated assessments^[footnote 7] of the effect which the COVID-19 response had had on women and disabled people.

WFD launched a programme in Bangsamoro^[footnote 8] (in the Philippines) to help local government transition through a peace process, while working towards gender equality and good governance. In the Western Balkans, WFD worked with the human rights and gender network of MPs^[footnote 9], supporting parliaments in promoting human rights and gender equality. Through its environmental democracy initiative^[footnote 10], WFD provided technical assistance to parliaments in Pakistan and Indonesia to advance the environmental protection agenda.

WFD led the ECDDQ-sponsored programme, the Commonwealth Partnership for Democracy, which helped 18 Commonwealth countries improve the representation of women, young people, people with disabilities, and the L.G.B.T.+ community. Successes included training 3,000 student leaders in Ghana and supporting three disability rights bills in Kenya. In October, WFD launched a new ECDDQ-funded programme with Kaleidoscope Trust, to tackle discrimination against women, girls, and L.G.B.T.+ people in 13 Commonwealth countries.

WFD also recruited international election observers for the UK, sending observers to participate in missions in a range of countries, including Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Moldova.

The Community of Democracies

We continued to work with the Community of Democracies (COD) – alongside 30^[footnote 11] other states that support adherence to common democratic values and standards as outlined in the 2000 Warsaw Declaration. The COD celebrated its 20th anniversary on 26 June, and signatories to the Warsaw Convention, including the UK, on 27 June pledged to continue to uphold core democratic values. This included the right of every person to equal access to public service and to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives. Signatories also agreed to strengthen the institutions and processes of democracy.

Transparency and open government

The COVID-19 response and recovery demonstrated that transparency, openness and freedom of the press are crucial to preventing corruption and supporting an effective COVID-19 recovery. The UK supported and promoted transparency, accountability and participation, which are fundamental to open and inclusive societies. We continued to work through multilateral engagement and innovative global

projects to deliver this.

In 2020, the FCO continued to support the Open Government Partnership (OGP) globally through a £12 million programme to drive open government reforms in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa and Sri Lanka. The OGP supported countries to integrate open government approaches into their COVID-19 responses and recovery. In Nigeria, the OGP worked with civil society organisations to establish citizen monitoring of economic stimulus and social protection packages. Speaking at the OGP's Virtual Leaders' Summit at the UN General Assembly in September, Minister for Human Rights, Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon highlighted that the work of the OGP was now more important than ever. [\[footnote 12\]](#)

Civil society

Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression is essential to functioning democracies, and enables a full range of other human rights. People need to be able to challenge and hold their governments to account through open discussion and debate. This allows innovation to thrive, ideas to develop, and leads to more secure and prosperous societies.

The right to freedom of expression exists online as well as offline. The UK is committed to a free, open, peaceful and secure internet. In 2020, the NGO Access Now documented [\[footnote 13\]](#) at least 155 internet shutdowns in 29 countries, including during elections, so disrupting democratic processes. We continued to support Access Now and its #KeepItOn campaign, which brought together a coalition of 243 organisations from 105 countries to counter internet shutdowns. The UK also worked to defend a free, open and secure internet through our membership of the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC), a partnership of 32 countries, working to advance internet freedom. In May, the FOC issued a statement [\[footnote 14\]](#) on COVID-19 and internet freedom, expressing concern about the human rights implications of some measures introduced by governments in response to the pandemic. In November, the UK and Finland led a statement by the FOC calling on governments to refrain from conducting and sponsoring disinformation campaigns, and to take active steps to respect human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

In Tanzania, there were increasing restrictions on freedom of expression around national elections: the UK was deeply troubled by reports of violence and heavy-handed policing; arrest of opposition leaders; and a social media and internet slowdown. The Minister for Africa, James Duddridge, and officials at the British High Commission in Tanzania raised our concerns directly with the Tanzanian Government. In Rwanda, critical voices continued to face heavy restrictions. The UK raised concerns about specific cases with the Government of Rwanda, underlining the need to allow opposing voices to hold the government to account. This included the case of Kizito Mihigo, a prominent musician and reconciliation activist, who died in police custody in February. In Algeria, freedom of expression continued to be subject to restrictions, with reports of arbitrary arrests of journalists and human rights activists. The UK monitored cases closely, and underlined the importance of freedom of expression regularly with the Algerian government, including with the Interior Minister, Tayeb Belaiz, in November 2020.

Human rights defenders

Support for human rights defenders (HRDs) is an important part of the UK government's human rights work. Minister for Human Rights, Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon reaffirmed this support in his message on International Human Rights Defenders Day on 9 December, when he thanked HRDs around the world for their courage and unwavering determination in fighting for human rights. HRDs play a crucial role, often at great risk to themselves, in defending the full range of human rights. They are crucial to promoting the rights of their fellow citizens and to contributing to the long-term reform and development of their countries, by documenting human rights violations and acting as agents of change.

In 2020, HRDs played an important leadership role in protecting democracy and civic space where governments used COVID-19 to justify the restriction of human rights and the rule of law. According to the NGO Frontline Defenders [\[footnote 15\]](#), at least 331 HRDs were killed in 2020 across the world. Other HRDs were threatened, arbitrarily detained, placed under surveillance or disappeared.

Our diplomatic network provided support to HRDs, including by monitoring cases, observing trials, and raising issues with host governments. We continued to use the document 'UK support for Human Rights Defenders' (published in July 2019 [\[footnote 16\]](#)), which sets out our approach to engaging with HRDs, and how we work with them to further human rights globally. We will continue to work closely with partners to consider what more can be done to support HRDs.

In Iran, HRDs continued to be targeted and imprisoned for helping the most vulnerable. On 22 September, the FCO summoned the Iranian Ambassador and handed over a joint letter from the UK, French and German Foreign Ministers, expressing our concern about the grave human rights violations inside Iran. We drew particular attention to the imprisonment of renowned human rights defender Nasrin Sotoudeh, and urged Iran to improve her treatment.

In Colombia, the situation continued to be serious for HRDs. The UN confirmed that at least 120 HRDs had been killed in 2020, an increase on 2019, and called these killings one of the greatest threats to the implementation of Colombia's 2016 peace agreement. There were indications that the situation had worsened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, as illegal armed groups took advantage of it to increase their control over some areas. In addition to the support provided to at-risk HRDs through UK-funded programmes, a virtual visit by Lord Tariq Ahmad in October allowed us to raise our concerns with the Colombian government.

In Turkey, HRDs in particular were targeted for their work, often under harsh counter-terrorism legislation. We attended trials of high profile HRDs, and lobbied the Turkish government at ministerial level on individual cases.

In Thailand, we continued to be concerned about the protection of HRDs in light of disappearances and a resumption of the use of the lèse majesté law [\[footnote 17\]](#) and other charges to limit freedom of expression. The UK raised the issue with the Thai Government. We actively supported civil society through project funding, direct engagement with activists and HRDs, and activities in partnership with like-minded Embassies. UK-funded programmes supported training to equip HRDs with digital skills, and legislative reform to tackle strategic litigation against public participation.

Restrictions of civil society space

2020 was a difficult and challenging year for civil society amid the fallout from COVID-19, with high levels of polarisation, discontent and democratic backsliding. The CIVICUS Monitor [\[footnote 18\]](#) attested that 87% of the world's population now live in countries rated as "closed", "repressed", or "obstructed"—an increase of over 4% from 2019. Restrictions on civic freedoms affected some groups more than others, particularly women, youth, the LGBT+ community, and those working on labour and environmental issues.

We were concerned about the decline in civic space conditions in the Philippines due to the targeting of ~~HRDs~~ and journalists and called out specifically the continued actions against Maria Ressa. In Iraq, 2020 saw a number of killings of civil society, political and human rights activists, and increased threats against journalists. The Egyptian government restricted civil society space further in response to COVID-19 with regard to association, assembly and protest. The government amended or extended several laws on the closure of civic space targeting journalists, media and healthcare officials. In September, Amnesty International India suspended operations after its bank accounts were frozen for allegedly breaching the Foreign Contributions Regulations Act. In Turkey, civil society continued to be restricted, with many organisations facing government investigation into their activities. The UK continued to promote and fund a variety of civil society organisations, as well as hosting them at the Embassy in panel discussions on issues such as media freedom and legislation governing internet management. In Indonesia, the UK continued to monitor closely the situation in the Papua region and continued to lobby at ministerial level for access by international journalists. The UK fully respects Indonesia's territorial integrity, including the provinces of Papua and West Papua. We continued to lobby at ministerial level for access for international journalists to the region.

The UK supported civil society activists, including through funding for civil society organisations and women's groups, and others pursuing justice and accountability. Through UK Aid Connect, the ~~FCDO~~ supported local civil society in the Middle East and North Africa in navigating the increasingly repressive media environment in the context of the pandemic. The UK funded the PROTECT^[footnote 19] consortium to combat closing civic space and tackle threats to media freedom in Kenya, Malawi and Myanmar.

Case study: #ENDSARS protests in Nigeria

In October 2020, there were protests in cities across Nigeria calling for an end to police brutality, prompted by a viral video which appeared to show Special Anti-Robbery Squad (~~SARS~~) officers shooting and killing a young man in southern Nigeria. The ~~SARS~~ police unit had already been at the centre of a number of allegations of police brutality. Protesters pushed for the unit to be disbanded, and called for wider police reforms and accountability. As the protests grew in number, there were some clashes between protesters and the Nigerian security services, including the police and army. Protesters and civil society groups alleged that the Nigerian Army shot and killed a number of civilians during protests on 20 October in Lekki, Lagos State.

In response to the events in Lekki, the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, issued a statement calling for an end to the violence and for the Nigerian Government urgently to investigate reports of brutality by its security services and hold those responsible to account. Minister for Africa, James Duddridge, made clear the Government's support for the right to peaceful protest. He spoke to Nigerian Foreign Minister, Geoffrey Onyeama, to express his deep concern at the violence and ask the Nigerian Government for an account of events. British High Commissioner in Abuja, Catriona Laing, also raised the protests, and the need for those responsible for events at Lekki to be held accountable, with representatives of the Nigerian Government, including the President's Chief of Staff, Ibrahim Gambari.

We welcomed the Nigerian authorities' subsequent decision to disband ~~SARS~~. We also welcomed their establishment of judicial panels of inquiry in many Nigerian states, including Lagos, to investigate alleged incidents of brutality by the security services, both historic incidents and those that occurred during the protests. In November, the Minister for Africa also spoke to the President's Chief of Staff, to emphasise the importance of the panels, and to the Governor of Lagos, Babajide Sanwo-Olu, to stress the importance of the police and military's cooperation with the panels.

The UK Government remains concerned by reports that the Nigerian authorities threatened protesters, panel members and members of civil society groups, including through freezing some bank accounts and banning individuals from international travel. It is essential for accountability that an environment is created where individuals feel free to raise concerns, including through the panels.

The UK government is a long-term supporter of police reform in Nigeria. Between 2016 and 2020, we provided training to the Nigerian police on human rights and community policing; strengthened accountability and oversight bodies, for example through organising meetings which brought together civil society groups, the Nigerian National Human Rights Commission and the police to resolve complaints; supported police-community engagement through community safety partnerships; and supported the development of annual policing plans. This work was focused in Lagos, Borno, Enugu and Kano states, and the Federal Capital Territory. As a result, relationships between communities and the police started to improve in these states, with communities and the police working together to resolve safety and security issues.

We supported civil society efforts to secure the successful passage of the new Police Act, which came into force in September 2020. The Act clearly set out the responsibilities for the police and provided for greater citizen protections. Implemented effectively, the Act will be an important step towards a more transparent and accountable police force.

In 2021, we will continue to urge the Nigerian security services to uphold human rights and the rule of law in all operations, investigate any incidents of brutality, and hold those responsible to account. We will follow the response to the panel's findings closely. We will work with our partners in support of more transparent and accountable security services in Nigeria.

Media freedom

The UK continued its commitment to supporting media freedom in 2020, working with media organisations and civil society around the world to deliver projects to protect and support journalists, including through the ~~FCDO~~'s Magna Carta Fund for Democracy and Human Rights and the cross-Whitehall Conflict, Security and Stability Fund. The UK's work on media freedom focused on several initiatives, including:

Media Freedom Coalition: Afghanistan, Cyprus, Japan, Botswana, Belize, Australia, Spain and Italy joined the Media Freedom Coalition in 2020, bringing the total membership to 42, including all G7 countries. Coalition members commit to raise media freedom at home and abroad, share best practice, and lobby on cases. The first meeting of Coalition members, where terms of reference and priorities were unanimously agreed, took place in January, and the Coalition thereafter issued a number of statements on cases of concern around the world, including on the situation in Belarus^[footnote 20].

High Level Panel of Legal Experts: an independent advisory panel of 15 distinguished lawyers, focused on improving legal protections for journalists and for a free and independent media. The Panel's first report^[footnote 21]—on the use of sanctions as a tool to protect media freedom—was launched in February. The UK's global human rights sanctions regime, subsequently launched in July, adopted a number of the Panel's recommendations on how to use sanctions to protect journalists. In November, the Panel published three further reports, on strengthening consular services to journalists at risk, providing safe refuge for journalists, and advice for promoting more effective investigations into violations and abuses against journalists^[footnote 22].

Global Media Defence Fund: the UK leads and supports the ~~UNESCO~~-administered Fund, aimed at ensuring effective legal assistance and support to civil society and journalists, including training and media development. The UK has committed £3 million over five years to the Fund. The first tranche of projects supported by the Fund launched in October, consisting of 110 proposals from all regions of the world

and targeting over 50 countries. These projects covered an array of issues, including help to provide legal advice and safety training for journalists. The Fund also supports the work of the High Level Legal Panel, and offers support to countries in developing National Action Plans for media freedom.

Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development (PRIMED) programme: This four-year programme, launched in 2019 and implemented by a consortium led by BBC Media Action, continued to work in Ethiopia, Bangladesh and Sierra Leone to support media organisations to protect and increase their delivery of high-quality public interest content. The programme mentored media organisations to help them develop better business models, identify new funding streams, and strengthen engagement with their audiences. It also worked with a wide coalition of defenders of freedom of expression, to advocate change in the media environment, and better defend media freedom in these three countries.

The UK participated in a number of media freedom events during 2020. As co-chair of the Coalition, the Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab presented the inaugural Canada-UK Media Freedom Award to the Belarusian Association of Journalists in recognition of their continued commitment to journalistic ethics and principles in the face of a sustained and brutal crackdown on independent media in Belarus. In December, he spoke at the ministerial meeting of the World Press Freedom Day Conference, where he reaffirmed the UK's commitment to using its G7 presidency to champion media freedom.

The UK was concerned by the attempts of some states to use the COVID-19 pandemic to restrict press freedom and debate, abuse journalists and spread disinformation. The UK remained concerned about the deteriorating situations in a number of countries where journalists continue to be under threat. In Egypt, for example, foreign journalists continued to face difficulty obtaining press permits and, in March, the British correspondent for The Guardian was expelled after claiming that COVID-19 cases were being underreported. In November, Minister for Human Rights, Lord Tariq Ahmad, expressed the UK's concern at the situation faced by journalists in Egypt and, as co-chair of the Media Freedom Coalition, the UK released a statement^[footnote 23] expressing concern at the arrest and intimidation of individuals associated with the independent news website Darb.

In Indonesia, we supported a project to analyse the impact of the pandemic on media. Additionally, we initiated and supported a series of webinars in conjunction with BBC Media Action and Indonesia's Press Council that delve into various aspects of the COVID-19 vaccine in Indonesia.

In the Philippines, the Embassy monitored and spoke out on the case of Maria Ressa, the shutdown of ABS-CBN network, and the harassment and detention of a number of journalists. We expressed concern about the message these developments sent about media freedom in the Philippines.

In Turkey, where a large number of journalists were prosecuted, we urged the government to implement social media legislation in a fair and transparent manner, and raised at ministerial level our concerns about the treatment of journalists.

In Vietnam, journalists, bloggers and those advocating open debate were silenced and subjected to lengthy terms of imprisonment. We raised concerns, including during the Foreign Secretary's visit in September. Vietnam has committed to working with the UK on media exchanges.

In China, the authorities continued to curtail media freedom. There were believed to be at least 47 journalists^[footnote 24] in detention in China in 2020. We continued to raise media freedom with the Chinese authorities, urging them to allow journalists to practise their profession without fear of arrest, harassment or reprisal, and to end extensive censorship and control over the media and wider means of expression.

In Ethiopia, several journalists and editors were arrested and detained without charge, or were intimidated. The UK raised its concerns with the Government of Ethiopia, and UK programmes continued to help the media sector operate in a professional and independent way.

In Zimbabwe, we welcomed the legislative processes to replace restrictive Mugabe-era laws. However, implementation remained a concern, with the continued arrests of media practitioners, opposition figures and citizen journalists for expressing their views. The Media Institute of Southern Africa reported 49 human rights violations against journalists in 2020.

In Venezuela, attacks against press freedom persisted through arbitrary detentions, the blocking of websites, and the shutting down of media outlets. Journalists and healthcare workers faced intimidation when criticising the regime's management of the COVID-19 pandemic. The UK ran technically-focused projects to support capacity-building for journalists on topics such as personal protection.

While 2020 saw negative developments relating to media freedom in many countries, there were also some signs of progress. Sierra Leone voted to repeal its criminal libel law, and passed a new Independent Media Commission Act, helped by significant lobbying and support from the British High Commission. This was a major win for media freedom, which the UK supported through technical assistance to the Independent Media Commission to strengthen the media regulators following the repeal of the libel law.

Under Burundi's new President, Évariste Ndayishimiye, there was some progress regarding respect for media freedom, notably a presidential pardon in December for four Iwacu newspaper journalists.

The UK remains committed to championing media freedom around the globe, both bilaterally and through the Media Freedom Coalition. In 2021, we will use our G7 Presidency to promote media freedom, including through greater support to the Media Freedom Coalition, the Global Media Defence Fund, and improved co-ordination in Official Development Assistance—all with the aim of making the world a safer place for journalists, and supporting resilient and financially sustainable models for independent journalism.

Freedom of religion or belief

Defending freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for all, and promoting respect between different religious communities, are key priorities for Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and for Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab. Concerns about the denial of FoRB grew in 2020, with some religious minorities blamed for the spread of COVID-19, and being scapegoated or targeted as a result.

Work on this issue was led by the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)^[footnote 25], and by the Minister for Human Rights, Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon. On 20 December, the Prime Minister appointed Fiona Bruce MP as his Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Monitoring developments around the world and raising issues of concern continued to be central to our work on FoRB in 2020. In China, we remained concerned about systematic restrictions on the practice of Islam, especially in Xinjiang. Restrictions remained in place concerning other groups, including Christians, Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners, and other religious groups across the country. The UK delivered the first joint statement on the plight of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang at the Human Rights Council in June, and raised concerns about the situation in Xinjiang and Tibet alongside 38 other countries in a joint statement at the UN General Assembly Third Committee in October.



The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office lit up to mark Red Wednesday on 25 November 2020, in support of persecuted Christians around the world.

In Pakistan, Ahmadi Muslims continued to flee constitutional discrimination and, Christians, Hazaras, Hindus, Shia Muslims and other minorities continued to suffer persecution and violence, including faith-based killings and attacks on places of worship. In Sri Lanka, the government announced a policy of mandating cremations for all COVID-19 deaths, despite WHO guidelines which permit burials. This particularly affected Muslim and some Christian communities, for whom burial is an essential rite. Lord Tariq Ahmad led lobbying on this which saw this policy being overturned. Intercommunal religious violence took place in India, where over 50 people were reported to have been killed. The UK raised concerns with the Indian authorities about the impact of legislative and judicial measures on members of religious minorities.

In north-east Nigeria, terrorist groups, including Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa, sought to undermine the Nigerian constitutional right to FORB by deliberately attacking both Christian and Muslim communities which did not subscribe to their extremist views. Intercommunal violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt continued to be of concern. While religious identity was an important factor, the overall causes were more complex, particularly competition over land and resources driven by population growth, climate change and criminality. The FCDO will continue to look at ways to address these factors, to reduce levels of violence and ease tensions.

In Myanmar, legislation continued to favour the Buddhist majority. We encouraged the Government of Myanmar to reform the 1982 citizenship law, used in the 2020 elections to prevent some Muslim candidates from standing. Following damage from violence in 2016 and 2017, many mosques in Myanmar found obtaining permission to undertake restorations challenging. The Rohingya, an ethnic group comprised mostly of Muslims, but also Hindus and a small number of Christians, continued to be denied citizenship. The UK Ambassador called on various ministers in Myanmar to remove religion as a category from state-issued documentation. The UK continued to raise the plight of the Rohingya through multilateral fora, including the UN Security Council.

Provisions on FORB were maintained in the new constitution in Algeria that came into force in December 2020. We have raised with the Algerian government the importance of supporting legislation being implemented quickly. The UK Ambassador discussed at ministerial level, including with the Minister of Interior in November, our concern that some religious groups in Algeria, including Ahmadi minorities and Christians, had reported difficulties in practising their faith.

In July, Sudan abolished the death penalty for apostasy, a significant step in promoting FORB. In Eritrea, a number of worshippers, including Pentecostal and Muslim, were released from detention during 2020. However, many remained in detention and arrests continued.

In Yemen, six Baha'is were released from Houthi detention in July, including one who had faced the death sentence. This came after significant lobbying from the international community, including the UK. The six were subsequently forced to leave the country. We continued to follow closely the Houthi persecution of the Baha'i, including through meeting Baha'i representatives in the UK. We also continued to follow the case of Levi Salem Musa Merhavi, a member of Yemen's small Jewish community, detained since 2016 by the Houthis and subject to serious mistreatment.

In March^[footnote 26] and July^[footnote 27], the UK made statements at the OSCE which called on Russia to end the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses, and to uphold its commitments on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief for all individuals.

In Egypt, the number of licences issued under the 2016 Church Building Law continued to increase, with 1,800 church buildings receiving licences by the end of 2020. However, the continued detention of Coptic rights activist Ramy Kamel remained concerning. Sporadic sectarian tensions and the threat of Islamic extremism also continued to present challenges.

Working with like-minded partners remained central to our work, including engaging with the UK FORB Forum chaired by the Bishop of Truro, bringing together NGO representatives and parliamentarians. At the UN, we joined the new Group of Friends of Victims of Acts of Violence based on Religion or Belief in July. In February, the UK became a founding member of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, a network of countries working together to highlight cases of concern and advocate the rights of individuals around the world

being discriminated against or persecuted for their faith or belief. The Prime Minister's then Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Rehman Chishti MP, attended the launch event in Washington, and was later appointed Vice-Chair. Highlighting the impact of COVID-19 was a priority for the Alliance, and, in August, the UK joined a statement which recognised the impact of COVID-19 on minority religious and belief communities and called for full respect for FORB during the COVID-19 pandemic. In November, Lord Tariq Ahmad attended both the first Ministers' Forum of the Alliance and the Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief, hosted virtually by Poland.

With the creation of the FCDO, we continued to bring our policy and programme work together. Programmes delivered through the Institute of Development Studies and the University of Oxford were designed to empower religiously marginalised groups, counter hate speech, and address the legislative barriers to FORB.

Delivering the recommendations from the Bishop of Truro's review of, the then, FCO support for persecuted Christians remained a priority; ten of the 22 recommendations were fully delivered, and we made good progress on a further eight. We supported 15 FORB research projects through the John Bunyan Fund, and marked the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief in August, and Red Wednesday in November, lighting our site in King Charles Street red. Delivering Religion for International Engagement training to FCDO staff is a priority for 2021.



Lord Tariq Ahmad addresses the Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief, hosted virtually by Poland in November 2020.

We will continue to stand up for the right to freedom of religion or belief and promote respect between different religious communities. Our work with the Alliance will remain a priority for 2021, as well as delivery of the Truro Review recommendations to ensure that all 22 will be delivered by the time of the independent review of the report in 2022.

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, including heading the UK delegation to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). He also continued to support wider international work to address anti-semitism and restitution.

In January, the FCO and the Embassy of Israel marked International Holocaust Memorial Day and the 75th Anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Speakers included the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, Lord Pickles and Israeli Ambassador, Mark Regev. During the event, which for the first time included a digital exhibition, the Foreign Secretary announced that the FCO and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government would donate £1 million to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation to help with the preservation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau site as a museum to teach visitors about the Holocaust. The Foreign Secretary also gave a personal account of his own family's experiences of escaping from Nazi persecution.



Candles to mark International Holocaust Memorial Day and the 75th Anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

In the same month, Minister for Human Rights, Lord Tariq Ahmad, represented the United Kingdom at a meeting of IHRA in Brussels, to renew the UK's commitment to the founding principles of the Stockholm Declaration.

On 23 January, Lord Pickles attended the 5th World Holocaust Forum in Jerusalem, alongside HRH the Prince of Wales, and also participated in the 75th anniversary commemoration at Auschwitz-Birkenau on 27 January. As most meetings moved online, Lord Pickles continued to highlight the work of the UK to tackle anti-semitism and remember the Holocaust, including joining a number of World Jewish Congress and European Jewish Congress virtual meetings to discuss tackling online anti-semitism.

The UK held, until June, the Chair of the Arolsen Archive (formerly known as the International Tracing Service), a unique collection of documentation from Nazi concentration camps. This important archive is still being used to reunite families in the 21st century; a digital copy is held at the Wiener Library in London.

The UK continues to play a key role at IHRA. In October, IHRA adopted the draft non-binding working definition^{[footnote 28](#)} of anti-gypsyism/anti-Roma discrimination by consensus in an extraordinary Heads of Delegation meeting.

Gender equality

Women and girls' rights

The UK has remained unwavering in its commitment to gender equality and women and girls' rights, particularly in the face of COVID-19, which has exacerbated existing inequalities and disproportionately impacted the lives of women and girls across the world. We have continued to prioritise girls' education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, women's political empowerment and participation, women's economic empowerment, and ending gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, through our Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative.

In 2020, we worked with multilateral and bilateral partners to ensure that the global COVID-19 response and recovery took account of the needs, perspectives and experiences of women and girls. In September, we called on countries to take action through a joint statement at the UN General Assembly to mark the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Through the UN's 'Recovering Better for Sustainability' work, the UK has helped lay the foundations for a green, resilient and inclusive recovery with gender equality at its core.

The UK was concerned by increasing challenges to the hard-won rights for women and girls, and evidence has shown that countries used the pandemic to undermine further respect for the rights of women and girls. In negotiations at the UN and in other multilateral fora, the UK stood firm against concerted attempts to undermine respect for women and girls' rights, especially sexual and reproductive health and rights. We worked closely with like-minded states and civil society representatives to promote and protect the importance of women and girls' rights and life-saving sexual and reproductive health services for all.

Violence against women and girls

One in three women worldwide will experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. The elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a core part of the UK government's mission and of Global Britain's role as a force for good in the world. The UK has continued to lead global efforts to eradicate VAWG in all its forms.

VAWG has intensified during COVID-19. Tackling the shadow pandemic of VAWG has been central to the UK's response. We have reoriented ECDO programmes so that women and girls can continue to access support. For example, in Kenya, the UK supported the State Department for Gender to increase the capacity of the national helpline and support a coordinated approach to services for survivors. In

Nepal, we financed Women and Children Service Centres across the country. Across the Western Balkans, our Embassies responded to increased levels of **VAWG** through funding local organisations to provide safe houses, psychological help, and emergency relief packages, and to develop remote access to counselling services.

In September, we announced new funding of £1 million to the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women's COVID-19 Crisis Response Window, on top of our existing £21 million contribution. We also provided £10 million to the United Nations Population Fund, which includes funding to scale-up reporting, protection and support services for women and children affected by violence.

Building on the success of the UK's £25 million flagship What Works to Prevent Violence programme, we launched the tender for a successor programme in September 2020. This will be the first global effort to design systematically and evaluate rigorously the scale-up of successful violence prevention projects. The UK has also continued to lead the world in our support to the Africa-led movement to end female genital mutilation (**FGM**), including through our current five-year programme which began in 2019. We have seen positive signs of progress: Sudan, where the UK supported the Sudanese-led movement to end **FGM** since 2013, banned **FGM** in July 2020.

The UK further stepped up its global leadership on combatting **VAWG** as co-lead of the global Action Coalition on Gender-Based Violence (**GBV**). We used our membership of the Action Coalition platform to stimulate collective action, including initiating a joint statement on **GBV** and COVID-19 by the Action Coalition at the UN General Assembly in September.

Women, peace and security

The UK is a global leader on Women, peace and security (**WPS**), including at the UN Security Council. 2020 marked the twentieth anniversary of the first UN Security Council Resolution (**UNSCR**) 1325 on **WPS**. Through this resolution, the UK and other UN member states recognised the disproportionate impacts of conflict on women and girls, the need to prevent violations of women's rights, and the important role that women play in preventing and ending conflict and in sustaining peace. The UK government's National Action Plan (**NAP**) on **WPS** (2018–22) guides our approach in fragile and conflict-affected states to seek to achieve this objective.

In 2020, the UK focussed on promoting women's meaningful participation in peace processes, including in Afghanistan, South Sudan and Yemen, increasing support and protection for women resolving conflict, countering violent extremism, building peace at the grassroots, and responding to the increase in violence against women and girls following the COVID-19 pandemic. Working with UN Women and ActionAid Nigeria, we launched a new programme to encourage greater participation of women in decision-making on peace and security in Nigeria. The programme supports women's rights organisations and links them to female politicians to enhance their political support. It also identifies how to overcome the risks and threats women face by working in this field.

In March, Her Royal Highness The Countess of Wessex visited South Sudan where she met peacebuilders and women political leaders, including the first female Vice President of South Sudan, H.E. Rebecca Nyandeng de Mabior, to discuss the importance of including more women in the implementation of the South Sudan peace process, wider politics and decision-making.

In October, the Minister for **WPS**, James Cleverly, endorsed the UK-funded protection framework for women peacebuilders. The UK supported the mentoring of 30 female peacebuilders in Afghanistan, as well as increasing the opportunities for women to engage on peace across 15 provinces. We also provided technical assistance for the implementation of the second phase of Afghanistan's National Action Plan in financial year 2020/21, to help improve the rights of women and girls.

The UK supported the armed forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina to implement **UNSCR** 1325 by integrating gender perspectives and improving women's participation, including through implementing recommendations from the UK-funded gender audit. In Vietnam, the UK supported the Vietnamese Government's International Conference on **WPS** in December. The conference resulted in the 'Hanoi Commitment to Action', co-sponsored by over 50 countries, which was subsequently presented to the UN in February 2021.

Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative

Rape and other forms of sexual violence continued to be used as weapons of war in 2020. COVID-19 exacerbated the horrors faced by those affected by conflict-related sexual violence (**CRSV**). The Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (**PSVI**) remained an **FCDO** priority.

The Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict, Lord Tariq Ahmad, led UK efforts to prevent and respond to **CRSV**. The **PSVI** focussed on three objectives: strengthening justice for survivors of sexual violence and holding perpetrators to account; supporting all survivors and children born of **CRSV**, including tackling stigma and promoting access to holistic care; and preventing **CRSV** by addressing its root causes.

In June, Lord Ahmad, the Institute for International Criminal Investigations, and Nadia's Initiative launched the draft Murad Code for global consultations. The Code was designed to ensure that work with survivors to investigate, document and record experiences would be safer, more ethical and more effective. In November, we launched the 'Declaration of Humanity', calling for the prevention of **CRSV** and denouncing the stigma faced by survivors. High-profile faith and belief leaders, community leaders, and faith-based organisations, including in Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, the Vatican, Kosovo and Iraq, endorsed the declaration.

Putting survivors of **CRSV** first remained at the heart of our efforts. We worked closely with our **PSVI** Survivor Champions. In July, Lord Ahmad announced the UK's £1.3 million contribution to the Global Survivors Fund, an innovative, survivor-centred mechanism of redress. UK funding directly supported survivors in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Lord Ahmad undertook a virtual visit to Colombia in October and chaired a roundtable discussion with survivors and key stakeholders, including Jineth Bedoya, leading sexual violence campaigner, on how to make progress on these issues with the Deputy Interior Minister and Deputy Attorney General.

The then **FCO** welcomed the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (**ICAI**) report on the **PSVI**. The UK government published its formal written response on 20 February, and Lord Ahmad subsequently answered questions on the report at a meeting of the International Development Committee on 19 November. External scrutiny is important to ensure that the **PSVI** effectively achieves our overarching objectives.

In light of the continued COVID-19 outbreak, the UK government reassessed dates for the **PSVI** International Conference and continued to pursue the agreements and deliverables intended for the International Conference by other means.

Sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment

The UK remained committed to eradicating sexual exploitation and abuse (**SEA**) and also sexual harassment (**SH**) in the aid and peacekeeping sectors. We continued to play a leading role in driving improved global standards and performance on safeguarding. In September, we published the UK strategy on tackling **SEA** and **SH** in the aid sector. The UK fully supported the UN Secretary General's

zero tolerance approach to SEA.

We worked to ensure that we and our partners adhered to internationally agreed minimum standards on SEA and SH and to align our approaches and share lessons, including in relation to COVID-19. We continued to coordinate donors, the UN, NGOs, private sector and others, including to produce annual sector-wide progress updates against the 2018 Safeguarding Summit commitments.

We also continued to use 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 and on accountability measures. We deployed a senior policy adviser to support the implementation phase of NATO's SEA policy and the development of a Conflict Related Sexual Violence Policy.

We welcomed the ICAI report into SEA by international peacekeepers. We continued to drive change on SEA and SH through our programmes, including the Safeguarding Innovation and Engagement fund, Project Soteria, Resource and Support Hub, and the CSSE. Supporting victims and survivors of SEA and SH remains at the heart of our approach. As part of this, a new programme will begin in early 2021 to support victims and survivors, and to help the sector understand and implement a victim/survivor-centred approach.

Girls' education

Girls' education remained a top priority for the UK and for the Prime Minister in 2020. Access to education is a human right. In 2020, COVID-19 posed an unprecedented education crisis: according to Save Our Future^[footnote 29], 1.6 billion students were out of education because of the pandemic at the peak of school closures in 2020.



Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, visits the Discovery School in Kent, UK. Girls' education was one of the Prime Minister's priorities during 2020.



Lord Tariq Ahmad launched the flagship paper for the Platform for Girls' Education at a joint photography exhibition with the UAE on girls' education, during the 43rd session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in February 2020.

Education continued to unlock individual potential, empower girls and women, and benefit society as a whole, powering sustainable development. But the pandemic led to a real risk of a lost generation of girls never returning to school and significant learning loss for those who did.

The UK provided £20 million to UNICEF to protect vulnerable children, £5 million to Education Cannot Wait to support emergency education in conflict and crisis-affected countries, and £5 million to UNHCR to fund the salaries of over 5,500 teachers in refugee camps in ten countries.



In Pakistan, access to basic education and gender equality has improved in recent years. However, 44% of children aged 5-16 are out of school. More girls are out of school – 49% of girls compared to 40% of boys. Factors including gender-based violence, early marriage, boy-child preference and the prevalence of boys-only secondary schools all prevent Pakistani girls from acquiring a quality education. In 2020, the UK worked with Pakistan to further girls' access to education and to realise gender equality.



"One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world" - Malala Yousafzai. In Pakistan, under-privileged girls have been given the chance to learn through the provision of low cost schools (funded by UK aid).

In February, the flagship paper for the Platform for Girls' Education was published on the role of transformative political leadership in driving change for girls' education. Lord Tariq Ahmad launched the paper at a joint photography exhibition with the UAE on girls' education during the 43rd session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

In October, to rally international support for girls' education and ensure that we build back better, we developed two targets for low- and middle-income countries by 2025, aiming to get, first, 40 million more girls in primary and secondary school and, secondly, one third more girls reading by the age of ten.

Children and armed conflict

The UK is deeply committed to protecting all children in armed conflict. We remained the largest single financial contributor to the Office of the UN Special Representative to the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC), increasing our funding to £550,000 in the 2020/21 financial year. We also provided £300,000 to the UN Department of Peace Operations for the 2020/21 financial year to support the mainstreaming of the 2017 child protection policy into police components of UN peacekeeping operations.

The UK continued to be an active permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC) Working Group on CAAC, which leads the international response to violations committed against children in conflict. The working group focuses on responding to the UN Secretary-General's annual report and CAAC country-specific reports, which assess the treatment of children within conflict zones and list governments and armed groups for committing grave violations against children. In 2020, we made strong calls for action from parties to conflict in Afghanistan, Yemen, Colombia, Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Within multilateral fora, the UK advocated consensual adoption of the strongest possible language on CAAC in resolutions and thematic statements, in line with our obligations under international law, while holding other member states to account. We lobbied successfully for key commitments in September's UN Security Council presidential statement on protecting education against attack, including securing reference to the Safe School Declaration, despite strong opposition.

The rights of the child

The protection, promotion and realisation of children's rights form an integral part of the UK's international human rights agenda. The UK played a leading global role in efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 16.2 to end violence against, and abuse and exploitation of, children. The UK continued to be the largest donor to the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, which included funding to the Safe to Learn initiative dedicated to ending violence in and through schools. The FCDQ coordinated across other UK government departments to ensure that the extensive Rights of the Child portfolio was both reflected and protected at all stages of negotiations on relevant resolutions. In 2020, we helped secure the adoption by consensus of a strong resolution at the UN General Assembly, in line with UK priorities.

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, in order to guarantee the dignity, respect and rights which international human rights law offers all individuals. The UK works through international organisations, including the UN, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe and the Commonwealth to combat discrimination against L.G.B.T.+ people, and to address discriminatory laws.

The authorities of many countries continued actively to persecute L.G.B.T.+ people in 2020. Consensual same-sex relations continued to be criminalised in 69 countries, including 35 out of 54 Commonwealth countries. Even in countries where consensual same-sex relations are legal, many people still faced violence and discrimination because of their sexual orientation, and/or gender identity.



On International Trans Day of Remembrance on 20 November 2020, the UK flew the trans flag at our missions across China for the first time.

The global effects of the COVID-19 pandemic detrimentally affected L.G.B.T.+ people, further constraining their human rights, increasing the risk of violence and discrimination towards them, and disrupting access to essential services such as healthcare.

The pandemic had an adverse impact on important opportunities to mark the rights of L.G.B.T.+ people, such as the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT) in May, and local Pride Parades, given the limitations on public convenings. The UK government was clear that states must not use COVID-19 as an excuse for repressive, discriminatory action against L.G.B.T.+ people.

The UK's diplomatic network continued to champion the rights of L.G.B.T.+ people. More posts than ever flew the rainbow and transgender flags, including for the first time the British Embassies in Moscow and Beijing. In Turkey, the ban on peaceful Pride marches and the veto on L.G.B.T.+ cultural activities, seminars and discussions continued to be rigorously enforced. We continued to appeal to the Turkish authorities to relax the bans. In Panama, our Embassy raised concerns about the impact of gender-based COVID-19 restrictions on the country's transgender community, which limited their physical access to healthcare and public services. We facilitated conversations with civil society and like-minded embassies to raise L.G.B.T.+ people rights with the Panamanian Government; we ran a public campaign on human rights with a focus on the rights of L.G.B.T.+ people, and raised the rainbow flag during PRIDE month. Our missions in the Caribbean region consistently raised the importance of respecting and protecting the human rights of its L.G.B.T.+ citizens, which continued to be limited.



To mark Pride in June 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, British Embassy staff in Israel made a collage with photos of embassy staff and families to voice their unequivocal support for the LGBT+ community.

In September, the then Minister for Overseas Territories and Sustainable Development, Baroness Sugg, delivered a speech at a UN LGBTI core group event during the UN's General Assembly on the importance of taking an intersectional approach to tackling discrimination. She announced a new Commonwealth Equality Project of £3.2 million for financial year 2020/21 to follow on from the £5.6 million Equality and Justice Alliance project announced at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in London in 2018, again working with civil society to support countries seeking legislative reform. We also prioritised an additional £800,000 of funding for The Commonwealth Equality Network (TCEN) to support civil society work to advance LGBT+ equality.

In June, we welcomed the decision of Gabon's parliament to decriminalise same-sex relations.

With a core objective to increase respect for equality and non-discrimination for all, approximately £1.6 million of the International Programme Fund in financial year 2020/21 was allocated to support projects focused on the rights of LGBT+ people. Through UK Aid Connect, in 2020 we supported a programme entitled 'Strong in Diversity, Bold on Inclusion', led by Hivos that worked with a consortium of UK and southern NGOs to improve the socio-economic inclusion of LGBT+ people across Africa. We also supported work on LGBT+ inclusion within larger programmes on sexual and reproductive health rights and health care.

The UK and Argentina in 2020 continued to co-chair the Equal Rights Coalition (ERC), a grouping of 42 like-minded countries, working together with civil society and key stakeholders to address violence and discrimination against LGBTI individuals, and the continuing criminalisation of same-sex conduct. In June, the UK and Argentina delivered a statement on behalf of the ERC that called on all governments to limit the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people targeted on the basis of real or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. In November, the UK Embassy in Buenos Aires and the Argentine Ministry for Foreign Affairs co-hosted a virtual event to mark Pride Month in Argentina. Baroness Sugg delivered a video message to open the event, which reviewed our period as co-chair and considered the impact of COVID-19 on the ERC's work to advance LGBT equality. We continued with plans to deliver the ERC's first Strategy and Five Year Implementation Plan in 2021.

On 16 December, the ECDO funded a meeting of multi-faith religious leaders to discuss the impact of religion on global discrimination towards LGBT+ people, which produced a declaration calling for an end to violence and discrimination, to the criminalisation of same-sex conduct and to the practice of conversion therapy. ECDO Minister for Africa, James Duddridge, delivered a statement expressing the UK's support for the event and for its declaration.

In 2021, the UK will continue to work with international partners to advance LGBT+ equality. On 6-7 July 2021, we are delivering a virtual ERC conference, with a focus on launching the ERC's first Strategy and Five Year Implementation Plan. In June 2022, we plan to host the UK's first international LGBT+ rights conference in London (postponed from May 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic).

Modern slavery

Modern Slavery, preying on the most vulnerable in society, is a global problem that requires a global response. The UK remained committed to the eradication by 2030 of all forms of modern slavery, forced labour and human trafficking, as set out in Sustainable Development Goal 8.7.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on some of the poorest and most vulnerable across the world, including victims of modern slavery, and those who were previously vulnerable to it. The impact of the pandemic on supply chains and the labour market had a direct effect on workers across the world. One consequence in some parts of the world was reduced access to safe and reliable employment, making workers vulnerable to a heightened risk of exploitation.

In India, the nationwide lockdown resulted in its biggest migration crisis since 1947, affecting an estimated 120 million migrant labourers between March and June. UK programming supported the development of a report recommending policy interventions in the garment industry in India, to ensure safe migration from rural to urban areas. The findings contributed to the Jharkhand state government's COVID-19 response to reverse migration during lockdown, including the creation of a database to reduce the drivers of modern slavery, by diverting families to livelihood schemes and by ensuring continued schooling for children.

In Malaysia, increased global demand for personal protective equipment (PPE) highlighted concerns with modern slavery in the rubber manufacturing industry. The UK continued to engage with the Government of Malaysia, suppliers, manufacturers and civil society to improve the protection of vulnerable migrant workers and tackle labour abuses in government supply chains. In Indonesia, UK officials worked with partners to ensure robust coordination and data gathering processes regarding the victims of modern slavery. In the long-term, this will help the Indonesian Government's efforts to tackle human trafficking, as projects around better co-ordination and management moved towards policy implementation during 2020.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the UK in 2020 continued to support a range of programmes. The Work in Freedom 'Fair Recruitment and Decent Work for Women Migrant Workers' programme delivered training to women in the garment sector in India and Jordan, and worked with recruiters, businesses and governments to promote fair recruitment and decent work, reaching over 470,000 people during 2020. In Bahrain, we continued to support its progress on modern slavery, illustrated by it maintaining its Tier 1 status in the US Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report. We supported the CEO of the Labour Market Regulatory Authority through regular engagement with the UK, including with the UK's Anti-Slavery Commissioner and the UK Envoy on Modern Slavery and Migration, which in turn helped strengthen Bahrain's successful National Referral Mechanism (NRM) and bolstered Bahrain's position as a regional centre of excellence. Support also continued for the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery, focussing on supporting India and Bangladesh in mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 on individuals vulnerable to modern slavery, and supporting work to combat commercial sexual exploitation and support ethical recruitment. In the Indo-Pacific region, the FCDQ Asia Regional Child Labour Programme continued to work with UN agencies and civil society to reduce child labour through improving national capacity and policies on child labour, supporting social protection measures, and investing in research and child labour surveys.

The FCDQ continued to lead engagement with international partners, including a virtual Second Inter-Government Forum Against Trafficking in Persons, held in Abu Dhabi in October, attended virtually by the Jennifer Townson, UK Migration and Modern Slavery Envoy. Discussions focused on the challenges presented by human trafficking in the region, such as working directly with source and transit countries, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many posts in the FCDQ network marked the World Day Against Human Trafficking by holding awareness raising events, including in India, where the High Commission hosted a roundtable opened by Minister for Human Rights, Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, reinforcing the UK's partnership with authorities in India to eradicate human trafficking. The UK funded the training of 1,900 police officers on best practice on human trafficking cases across 54 districts in Madhya Pradesh during 2019-20. In 2020, the UK continued its advocacy and capacity building initiatives in partnership with the International Labour Organization (ILO). The ILO was also a partner in the FCDQ-funded Asia Regional Child Labour Programme, which worked to reduce vulnerability to child labour and to enhance the protection of children from exploitation in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Myanmar and Pakistan. As in previous years, we continued to raise modern slavery as part of the Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council.

In October 2020, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) published its report on the UK's approach to tackling modern slavery through the aid programme. The UK government published its response^[footnote 30] on 24 November, and committed to accepting or partially accepting all five of the review's recommendations. The government accepted three recommendations, including strengthening its approach to research; working more closely with survivors of modern slavery; and agreeing to publish a statement of overall international objectives. The government partially accepted two recommendations from the review: to continue to integrate modern slavery across a broader range of modern slavery programming objectives; and to strengthen its partnerships on modern slavery with a range of stakeholders, including the private sector and government partners. Finally, the government committed to a periodic review of its efforts to ensure continued progress on this agenda.

In September, the UK government announced a package of measures to strengthen the 2015 Modern Slavery Act, which gave law enforcement agencies the tools to tackle modern slavery, including maximum life sentences for perpetrators and enhanced protection for victims. The new measures included a transparency requirement, extending the duty to report on steps taken to prevent modern slavery to public bodies with a budget of £36 million or more. Large businesses with a turnover in the UK of £36 million or more already published such statements under the Modern Slavery Act. The UK government also published its first Modern Slavery Statement^[footnote 31] in March, setting out steps taken to tackle modern slavery in HMG procurement and supply chains. All UK government departments, including the FCDQ, were required to publish individual annual Modern Slavery Statements from Autumn 2021 onwards.

Human rights and the private sector

Business and human rights

The UK strongly supports the United Nations Guiding Principles (UNGPs) on business and human rights, the authoritative voluntary international framework to steer practical action by governments and businesses worldwide to address human rights risks in the private sector.

The UK was the first state to produce a National Action Plan to respond to the UNGPs, and the first to update its plan. A progress report was published on gov.uk in 2020^[footnote 32]. We are clear that we expect all our businesses to comply with all applicable laws; identify and prevent human rights risks; and behave in line with the Guiding Principles—including in their management of supply chains in the UK and overseas.

Internationally, the UK promoted the implementation of the UNGPs through National Action Plans (NAPs). We continued to work with the Government of Peru on its initiatives on business and human rights, including the development of their NAP, to be published in mid-2021. During our third Business and Human Rights Week in Guatemala and Honduras, we held three events on the importance of boosting human rights for improving the business environment.

The FCDQ continued to work closely with the UK National Contact Point, responsible for promoting the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) guidelines for multinational enterprises on responsible business conduct and for operating the complaints mechanism set out in the guidelines.

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 UNGPs. Further detail on the UK's VPs work can be found in the UK's 2020 Voluntary Principles Annual Update Report.^[footnote 33]

The UK continued to support the Security and Human Rights Implementation Mechanism (SHRIM), a 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 the human rights compliance of public mining and private security forces in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Kenya and the drafting of a new law on private security by the Government of Madagascar.

Private security companies

The UK is a signatory to the Montreux Document, which reaffirms the existing obligations of states under international law relating to the activity of private military and security companies during armed conflict. The UK advocates the implementation of the Montreux Document via the International Code of Conduct (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, and as a member of ICoCA. The UK continues to encourage all states, businesses and NGOs contracting Private Security Companies (PSCs) to recognise ICoCA membership.

We have worked with UK PSCs through the Security in Complex Environments Group to ensure that stakeholders are engaged with relevant government policy.

Responsible sourcing of minerals

Companies involved in the mining of tin, tantalum, tungsten and gold and their ores (known as 'conflict minerals'), other high-value minerals, and precious stones, 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.

In 2020, the UK continued to encourage UK importers of conflict minerals to carry out their responsibilities based on the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High Risk Areas.

Our work on conflict minerals during 2020 focused on requirements to implement the main operative provisions of EU Conflict Minerals Regulation (which came into force on 1 January 2021) in Northern Ireland. The EU Regulation is based on the OECD voluntary guidance and places due diligence obligations on the largest importers of 3TG across the EU. As required under the Northern Ireland Protocol of the EU Withdrawal Agreement, the UK government laid the Conflict Minerals Regulations^[footnote 34] before Parliament on 15 October which implement the main operative provisions of the EU Conflict Minerals Regulation in Northern Ireland. This means that, from 1 January 2021, the largest importers into Northern Ireland of 3TG need to conduct and demonstrate due diligence to ensure that their imports have been mined and processed responsibly. The Government will, in due course, consider what, if any, regulatory framework might be appropriate for Great Britain.

The UK is a member of the Governing Board of the European Partnership for Responsible Minerals (EPRM), and funded the EPRM Due Diligence Hub to support SMEs in implementing due diligence, which launched in April 2020.

The Kimberley Process

The UK remains committed to the principles and values of the Kimberley Process (KP). The KP is a conflict prevention measure that regulates the global trade in rough diamonds, with the aim of stemming the flow of conflict diamonds. The UK helped found the KP, and 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 UK worked throughout 2020 to ensure a seamless transition from participating in the KP as part of the EU to independent UK participation, which took effect at the end of the Transition Period on 31 December. Our participation in the KP and the activities of the Government Diamond Office, the UK's KP competent authority responsible for implementing the KP in the UK and verifying UK rough diamond imports and exports, enables us to take a leading role in preventing the rough diamond industry from fuelling conflict.

Death penalty and torture prevention

The UK government opposes the use of the death penalty, in all circumstances, as a matter of principle.

In 2020, we continued our work to increase the number of abolitionist countries and countries with a moratorium on death penalty use. We also continued to encourage retentionist countries to restrict the use of the death penalty, and to stop its use against juvenile and vulnerable offenders.

Global execution figures reached a record low in the past decade, with a 26% decrease in executions from 2019, according to Amnesty International's Global Report on Death Sentences and Executions 2020. China remained the world's top executioner with thousands of executions believed to have been carried out, though the true extent of death penalty use is unknown as this data is classified as a state secret. 88% of all other recorded executions took place in just four countries—Iran, Egypt, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. India, Oman, Qatar and Taiwan also resumed executions.

There was progress in 2020. Saudi Arabia announced positive legal reforms in relation to death penalty use for minors, and decreased its overall death penalty use (see country chapter for further information). In Sierra Leone, following regular UK lobbying, President Bio announced a constitutional review process to reform the criminal justice system, including a task force to review recommendations on abolishing the death penalty.

On the other hand, in March, Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia re-introduced the death penalty as an "exceptional measure of punishment" for drug trafficking. Nonetheless, the 2007 moratorium remains in force and any death sentence is expected to be commuted to life imprisonment.

In Belarus, the death penalty continued to be used, and the UK raised its concerns in multilateral fora. In Zimbabwe, death sentences continued to be passed, although the last execution was carried out in 2005. However, on 21 May, President Mnangagwa added his name to a pro-abolition UK-funded report.

In 2020, there were at least two executions in Bangladesh. In October, the government restored capital punishment for rape cases in response to anti-rape protests (see country chapter). While Pakistan retained the death penalty for 27 crimes, an amendment to the Counter Narcotics Substances Act, which could see drug offence crimes removed from the capital crimes list, was a positive development.

The UK also raised its concerns with US authorities over the use of the death penalty in retentionist US states, and over the resumption of federal executions in July 2020.

The UK government continued to fund projects dedicated to abolishing the death penalty through the Magna Carta Fund. The F.C.D.O. worked with the UK NGO Death Penalty Project to facilitate death penalty reform in retentionist countries, including by providing webinars on the relationship between mental health law and the death penalty for medical professionals in Bangladesh, and by carrying out strategic legal interventions in Trinidad and Tobago, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Tanzania.

The F.C.D.O. also worked with the NGO Reprieve on projects campaigning for the abolition of the death penalty in Malawi and Tanzania, and supporting prisoners on death row. Reprieve additionally provided support to Pakistan in its move away from the application of capital punishment.

The UK government unreservedly condemns the use of torture. We work closely with international partners to eradicate this abhorrent practice.

The F.C.D.O.-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. This included the Association for the Prevention of Torture, which campaigned to increase the protection of persons deprived of liberty from the spread of COVID-19 in Brazil, Mexico, Panama, the Philippines and Rwanda.

Overseas Security Justice Assistance

The F.C.D.O. 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 new OSJA assessments completed across government during the financial year of 2020 to 2021.

Number of OSJA cases for financial year 2019 to 2020

Region	Cases
Europe	164
Central Asia	16
Americas	60
Middle East & North Africa	141
Sub Saharan Africa	122
South Asia	53
Asia Pacific	69

Export controls

UK export licensing processes uphold our values by seeking to ensure that UK exports do not fuel conflict, lead to human rights violations, or enable the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. All export licence applications in 2020 were assessed on a case-by-case basis against the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria, which provide a thorough risk assessment framework, requiring among other things detailed consideration of the capabilities and impact of the equipment to be licensed.

Human rights considerations form a core part of these Criteria and our decision-making as to whether or not to approve an export licence. Under the Criteria the government will not grant a licence where, among other things, there is a clear risk that the items exported (i) might be used for internal repression or in the commission of a serious violation of International Humanitarian Law; or (ii) would be used aggressively by the recipient against another country or to assert a territorial claim by force; or where the exported item would provoke or prolong armed conflicts or aggravate existing conflicts in the country of final destination.

In 2020, the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, announced a number of measures in response to the imposition, by China, of the National Security Law on Hong Kong. This included extending to Hong Kong the arms embargo that has applied to mainland China since 1989.

We continued to apply international sanctions rigorously and monitored a range of political, military and other global developments, reflecting these in our licensing decisions. To do this, we utilise the most up-to-date information and analysis available at the time, including advice from those with diplomatic and military expertise and reports from our overseas network and NGOs.

The UK continues to operate one of the most transparent licensing regimes in the world, publishing information on all licences issued, refused or revoked. Export licensing decisions are accountable to Parliament, including through a statutory obligation to provide an Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls, last published in December 2020. The government also carried out enforcement action where necessary, and provided a wide range of training to help exporters understand their licensing obligations.

During 2020, the Export Control Joint Unit, located within the Department for International Trade, with input from Advisory Departments, assessed 15,753 Standard Individual Export Licence applications and issued 11,974, refused 268 and revoked 10 licences.

Migration and human rights

Throughout 2020, the UK worked internationally and bilaterally on a 'whole of route' approach to tackle irregular migration, which continued to expose migrants to the risk of exploitation and human rights abuses and violations.

In the English Channel, at least five migrants died attempting to cross from France to the UK in 2020, highlighting the consequences of people smuggling and human trafficking. The UK continued to work closely with France to tackle the serious and organised crime underpinning illegal migration.

The UK was proactive in providing protection to vulnerable migrants. We continued to support international efforts to help origin and transit countries reduce factors pushing people to risk their lives to migrate. We also supported irregular migrants on the move who wished to return home, and protected migrants in vulnerable situations.

This included our work with host governments to support effective migration management. In Turkey, the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) supported the authorities in delivering critical services to refugees and integrating refugees into host communities. In Greece, 2020 saw the implementation of a CSSF-funded package to purchase emergency humanitarian supplies and equipment for vulnerable migrants. Additionally, following the fire that destroyed the Moria migrant camp on Lesbos in September, the UK provided kitchen sets to nearly 2,000 vulnerable families and solar lanterns to help people stay safe. In April, the UK and Greece signed a bilateral 'Migration Action Plan' to underpin such cooperation.

Under the Safety, Support and Solutions Phase II programme, the UK provided support to selected families in Libya to host vulnerable migrants, with priority given to those most in need, such as migrants released or who had escaped from detention, and victims of human rights abuses and violations. In 2020, approximately 160 vulnerable migrants were supported.

Throughout the transition period in 2020, we continued to support the protection of vulnerable migrants and the integration of migrants into host communities, through UK contributions to the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey and the EU Trust Fund in Africa.

The UK remained firm in fulfilling its commitment, under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), to resettle 20,000 refugees who had fled the conflict in Syria. Because of unprecedented restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK, alongside many other countries, had to pause the resettlement of refugees temporarily. However, refugee resettlement resumed in December, with a view to bringing our final arrivals under the VPRS in early 2021. We will roll out a new global resettlement scheme in future, along with a new firm and fair asylum system which will welcome people through safe and legal routes.

The UK continued to make clear our expectation that all states should discharge their international obligations towards migrants with full respect for human rights. For example, following the fire that devastated the Lipa migrant camp in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in December 2020, the UK urged the BiH authorities to ensure that appropriate shelter was available for migrants.

Working internationally on a 'whole of route' approach to address irregular migration and its consequences will remain a priority in 2021.

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. The UK continued its support for increased economic opportunities for women through our programmes, which were reprioritised to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic:

'Work and Opportunities for Women' (WOW) adapted existing partnerships to ensure that they continued to benefit women working in supply chains impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the garment and agri-food sectors.

'SheTrades Commonwealth' focused on training women-owned businesses in digital literacy and e-commerce, and supported them to manage uncertainty and build resilience through the successful implementation of the COVID-19 Crisis Management Toolkit.

The UK's development finance institution, CDC^[footnote 35], is a leading member of the 2X Challenge, an initiative to mobilise capital to gender finance in developing countries. By the end of 2020, 2X members had contributed \$4.5 billion towards women's economic empowerment, exceeding the initial target of \$3 billion.

Rights of people with disabilities

In 2020, people with disabilities were disproportionately impacted, both directly and indirectly, by COVID-19.

The UK government produced a progress paper highlighting achievements on the Strategy for Inclusive Development (2018) and our pandemic response. For example, in Ghana, the Leave No One Behind programme reached 17,000^[footnote 36] people with disabilities and indirectly an additional 700,000 with accessible information on COVID-19. The UK co-chaired the Global Action on Disability (GLAD) network with the International Disability Alliance. We convened a high-level meeting in June to step up action on a disability inclusive COVID-19 response and recovery. As a result, over 200 governments and organisations signed a Call to Action to build a future which is inclusive for all.

Rights of older persons

Older people were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and were more likely to develop serious illnesses and to die from the disease. The UK sought to address this through implementing age-responsive approaches, such as the provision of technical advice to governments on the inclusion of older people in social protection.

The UK is committed to engaging closely with the Open Ended Working Group on Ageing, as well as to supporting the human rights of older people through work at the UN Human Rights Council and at the UN General Assembly.

Right to the highest attainable standard of health

Throughout 2020, the world faced unprecedented challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. The UK took a leading role in the COVID-19 response, committing up to £1.3 billion in 2020 (to COVAX^[footnote 37], increased funding to the WHO and support to partner countries to support their health care systems) and working with partners to address the impacts of the pandemic. The UK-hosted Global Vaccine Summit mobilised US\$8.8 billion and launched the COVAX Advance Market Commitment (COVAX AMC), an initiative to support access to COVID-19 vaccines in up to 92 developing countries. Through match funding, the UK mobilised £1 billion for the COVAX AMC, ensuring vaccine access to the more vulnerable.

The demands of the emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic needed to be balanced with delivery of other essential health services. As a leading donor to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the UK supported countries in reinforcing health systems and mitigating impacts on critical HIV, tuberculosis and malaria programmes. Similarly, our investment in GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, has supported routine immunisation programmes and provided grants for personal protective equipment (PPE) and infection control.

The weakness of developing countries' health systems is one of the biggest risks to the global impact and spread of health threats, such as COVID-19. The UK will continue to work with partners, including G7 members and WHO, to strengthen global health security as set out in the Prime Minister's five-point plan for pandemic preparedness.

The UK is committed to global health, including ending the preventable deaths of mothers, newborn babies and children by 2030. Within the UN Omnibus Resolution on the COVID-19 pandemic, we secured commitments to responsive, accountable and people-centred health systems, and protected references to the right of women and girls to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health, including sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Nutrition, water, sanitation and land

The impacts of COVID-19, combined with pre-existing factors, led to almost one billion people being severely food insecure by the end of 2020^[footnote 38], on an accelerating downward spiral. COVID-19 also led to an estimated 6.7 million^[footnote 39] more children becoming acutely malnourished in 2020—taking the total number of children affected by acute malnutrition to just under 54 million worldwide. COVID-19 significantly exacerbated pre-existing shocks and stresses, including conflict, climate shocks and the effects of locusts and other pests, and reduced local food availability and access by disrupting food production and marketing; limiting access to food markets; generating food price spikes in some countries; and reducing incomes because of lockdowns. The UK announced a new £119 million aid package to combat the threat of coronavirus and famine as it looked forward to the G7 and COP26 Presidencies. This included a new £30 million partnership with UNICEF to improve management of acute malnutrition, and £15 million to provide life-saving food assistance to over 600,000 people in the north-east of Nigeria. Between 2015 and 2020, the UK reached 55.1 million^[footnote 40] women, adolescent girls and children with services to address their nutritional needs.



Communities in Mozambique supported by UK funded project Transforming Rural Water, Sanitation and Hygiene. Photo credit PRONASAR/SNV.

The UK recognises that the right to water and sanitation derives from the right to an adequate standard of living. SDG 6 calls for universal access to safe water and sanitation. Between 2015 and 2020^[footnote 41], the UK helped 62.6 million people gain access to clean water and/or better sanitation.

Land and related social rights are linked to the human rights to own property and be entitled to its peaceful enjoyment. In 2020, the UK government supported good land governance as a key pillar of inclusive economic development and sustainable land use, and as a means to further the enjoyment of human rights. Achievements included strengthening tenure security of poor people through land registration programmes. Since 2010, UK-funded land programmes issued over 14.5 million land certificates or titles, and helped strengthen the land rights and tenure security of over 12 million women.

Social protection

The World Bank report on poverty and shared prosperity estimated^[footnote 42] that global extreme poverty would rise in 2020 for the first time in two decades because of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The UK recognises the important role that social protection plays in preventing and reducing poverty, vulnerability and inequality, which is essential for the achievement of SDG 1 to end poverty. Social protection has been a cornerstone of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in over 200 countries. The UK supported social protection programming in more than 25 countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East and North Africa. We adapted our programmes and policy to respond to the COVID-19 crisis.

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. The UK continued to encourage the territories to seek the extension of the core UN human rights conventions ratified by the UK, although 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 for children. Tailored programmes of support were delivered for a number of territories. For example, the UK facilitated practice partnerships between a number of territories and UK local authorities, which enabled the sharing of good practice on subjects such as assessment processes, case management and fostering provision, and provided a source of operational and strategic advice. Through UNICEF, we delivered a Positive Behaviour Management Programme for Educators and Parents.

The UK government is committed to equal rights, including upholding the rights of LGBT+ people. At the end of 2020, ten Overseas Territories had legal recognition and protection for same-sex relationships. Same-sex marriage is legal in the British Indian Ocean Territory, British Antarctic Territory, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Pitcairn Islands, St Helena, Ascension Island, Tristan da Cunha, and the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia for UK military and civilian personnel.

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 appealed the ruling to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. The hearing was expected to take place in 2020, but was delayed by Covid-19^[footnote 43].

In November 2019, the Cayman Islands Court of Appeal reversed the decision of the Grand Court that provided for same-sex marriage. The judgment tasked the then Legislative Assembly to move expeditiously to provide legal recognition and protection (functionally equivalent to marriage) for same-sex relationships in the Cayman Islands. In response, the Premier, Alden McLaughlin, tabled a bill in July to enable this in the then Legislative Assembly. However, the bill was rejected by one vote. In order to ensure compliance with the Cayman Islands Court of Appeal ruling, Baroness Sugg (then UK Minister for the Overseas Territories) instructed the Governor in August to use his reserved powers under the Cayman Islands Constitution, to enact legislation providing for same-sex partnerships. The first legally recognised same-sex partnership was registered on 28 October 2020.

In 2021, we will continue to encourage all of the Overseas Territories to ensure enjoyment of human rights by all their citizens, and to ensure that all legislation is compliant with human rights obligations.

Human rights and democracy programmes

One way in which the F.C.D.O. supports other countries in meeting their human rights obligations is through funding provided by the International Programme. In the difficult fiscal and delivery circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic during most of 2020, the UK remained committed to human rights and democracy programmes. The pandemic presented a new pressure on human rights internationally, which the UK adapted its support to reflect.

F.C.D.O. funding covers a wide geographic spread and range of activities, in support of the F.C.D.O.'s strategic objective to project our global influence as a force for good. It also helps to advance the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). F.C.D.O. programme funding complements other funding mechanisms, such as the Conflict, Security and Stability Fund (CSSF), as well as funding from other government departments. It enables the F.C.D.O. to support traditional diplomatic activity, respond effectively to changing international situations, and leverage funding from international partners and the private sector.

In 2020, the human rights and democracy programme objectives were to:

- work closely with domestic and international partners to drive international efforts to combat modern slavery
- stand up for the freedom of people of any or no religion to practise their beliefs in peace and safety
- support the right of human rights defenders to carry out their work, while being able to voice their opinions freely and safely
- promote the development and strengthening of democracy, including through the work of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy
- oppose the death penalty and the use of torture as a matter of principle, in all circumstances
- continue the UK's commitment to defend and support media freedom internationally, building on commitments made at the 2019 global conference in London
- work with business and civil society, to support adherence to the UN Guiding Principles on Responsible Business and responsible practice by global extractives businesses

The UK government is committed to a foreign policy that consciously and consistently delivers gender equality. This has meant providing funding to support:

- the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict initiative in (i) strengthening justice for survivors of sexual violence in conflict and holding the perpetrators to account; (ii) supporting all survivors and children born of conflict-related sexual violence, and helping them tackle the stigma they face; and (iii) preventing and responding to sexual violence in conflict, including through militaries and police
- the opportunity for all girls to receive 12 years of quality education, focussing on providing support for out-of-school girls, tackling the barriers that are stopping girls from accessing education, and ensuring their safe return to school
- women's meaningful inclusion in peace processes; increasing support and protection to women resolving conflict; countering violent extremism; and building peace at the grassroots level
- supporting and advocating 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

The UK co-funded the N.G.O. Reprieve to progress the campaign to abolish the death penalty in Malawi, which included funding for legal aid lawyers to improve capital defence skills as well as the delivery of community workshops. One notable achievement was the release of an individual on bail, after 19 years on death row.

UK funding of TRIAL International delivered a more effective legal response to conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), including landmark prosecutions in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the Philippines, our work with the International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IAWRT) provided safety training for 18 women journalists in cities across the country. Topics included digital safety and security, device security, encryption, and video conferencing, to allow women journalists to be more able to protect themselves when reporting.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, funding increased the capacity of a Working Group (WG) on business and human rights to report on human rights violations at mining sites. As a result, the WG successfully investigated allegations of human rights abuse by a member of the public security force, which led to his removal from office. The WG continues to work with the Mining Police to improve their internal human rights monitoring capacity and with the public security forces, communities and mining companies to resolve human rights issues associated with mining.

Chapter 2: Human rights and the multilateral system

Human rights at the UN

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

In 2020, 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 \$9 million. This included support for projects on preventing conflict, combating sexual and gender-based violence, and specific country issues.

Human Rights Council

Against the backdrop of COVID-19, the HRC was able to continue its important work throughout 2020 with a mix of in-person and online working.

In October, the UK was elected to the HRC for the 2021-23 term. As part of our campaign for election we committed: 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; and to be at the forefront of global efforts to protect media freedom.



Country issues

The UK continued to lead action on human rights in Syria, drafting resolutions at each HRC session, and as a member of the core group for the UNGA Third Committee resolution. The March session of the HRC renewed the mandate of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria. The July resolution highlighted concerns around arbitrary detention. The UK has repeatedly condemned all violations and abuses of international human rights law and all violations of international humanitarian law. We provided a further £285,000 to the UN's International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM).

We worked with partners to convene the UNSC three times in 2020 to discuss the ongoing genocide case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice, the situation in Rakhine and Chin, and elections. The UK also played an active role in resolutions at the UNGA and HRC. We continued to fund the IIIM to gather and preserve evidence of atrocities, and co-hosted a donor conference on the crisis with the US, EU, and the UN Refugee Agency in September.

The March session of the HRC adopted four resolutions under Item 7 (Human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories), and one resolution under Item 2 (High Commissioner's report). The UK opposes any proposed annexation of parts of the West Bank and we remain committed to a two-state solution with Jerusalem as the shared capital of both Israel and Palestine. We continued to support justified scrutiny of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories under appropriate agenda items, but remained concerned by the HRC's disproportionate focus on Israel, which does little to advance the two state solution.

We continued to support EU-led resolutions on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) at the March session of the [HRC](#) and at the [UNGA](#) Third Committee. Both resolutions addressed the most serious issues related to the dire human rights situation in the DPRK.

In March, the [HRC](#) renewed the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Iran. We remained part of the core group on the [UNGA](#) Third Committee resolution. Throughout the year, we continued to highlight our concerns about limitations on freedom of religion or belief, and restrictions on freedom of expression, the lack of the rule of law, and on the failure to uphold the rights of women.

At the [HRC](#) session in March, the government of Sri Lanka withdrew its support for [HRC](#) resolutions on post-conflict transitional justice, accountability, and reconciliation. The Sri Lankan Government announced its commitment to a domestic mechanism for reconciliation and accountability, but there was no progress on this.

At the [UNGA](#) 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, and sought to ensure Russia's accountability for its actions there.

The September session of the [HRC](#) adopted two resolutions on Yemen, including the renewal of the mandate for the Group of Eminent Experts. We remained clear that the only way to end the cycle of violence is through a lasting political settlement and that the UK would continue to support the efforts of the UN Special Envoy.

In September, the [HRC](#) held an urgent debate on the deteriorating human rights situation in Belarus. The UK delivered a national statement^{[[footnote 44](#)]} in support of the accompanying resolution, setting out our serious concerns about violence and repression by the Belarusian authorities towards peaceful protesters, journalists, opposition figures and civil society representatives.

The UK raised concerns about human rights in China at the [HRC](#) and the [UNGA](#) Third Committee. In June, the UK delivered a joint statement^{[[footnote 45](#)]} at the [HRC](#) on Xinjiang and Hong Kong on behalf of 28 countries. In the statement, we urged China to allow immediate, meaningful, and unfettered access to Xinjiang for independent observers, including the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and members of her Office. At the September Council, Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon delivered our 'Item 4' national statement^{[[footnote 46](#)]} focused entirely on China. The UK was one of 39 countries to raise concerns^{[[footnote 47](#)]} about the situation in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet at the [UNGA](#) Third Committee in October.

Across the three [HRC](#) sessions in 2020, the UK also worked with partners to mandate an international fact finding mission in Libya, to renew the mandate of the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, and to renew the mandates of (among others) the Special Rapporteurs on Eritrea and Belarus, and Independent Experts on Mali, the Central African Republic and Somalia, as well as the Commission of Inquiry on Burundi. We supported resolutions on the human rights situations in Nicaragua, Georgia (relating to the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Venezuela, DRC (the Kasai region), the Philippines, Cambodia and Sudan.

Thematic issues

The tragic killing of George Floyd emphasised the need to work harder to combat racism. During the reconvened March session and subsequent urgent debate^{[[footnote 48](#)]}, the UK reaffirmed our commitment to do that. We continued to be one of the strongest advocates for those UN mechanisms helping to combat racism.

We were concerned by consistent attacks in UN fora on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). At the [HRC](#) and [UNGA](#) Third Committee in 2020, with like-minded states we pushed back against the US, Russia and OIC delegations' tactics designed to disrupt negotiation proceedings, including opposing previously agreed language on reproductive rights, tabling last-minute amendments, and triggering votes on gender-related resolutions. The US also led an anti-abortion 'Geneva Consensus Declaration'^{[[footnote 49](#)]} that drew the support of 35 states. These attacks on the rights of women and girls were concerning, at a time of increasing sexual and gender-based violence around the world, with women and girls facing reduced access to essential health services. We were disappointed that the Egypt-led [UNGA](#) resolution on the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls failed to include the importance of SRHR, or the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. We showed multilateral leadership, for example lobbying to achieve record support by 122 states for language on SRHR in the COVID-19 omnibus resolution at [UNGA](#). We also worked with other states to block a Russian-led [UNSC](#) resolution that would have weakened the normative framework of the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

As in previous years, a group of states attempted to remove a reference to sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) in a Third Committee resolution on extrajudicial killings—the only [UNGA](#) text with such a reference. The UK worked with like-minded states and civil society, including through the UN LGBTI Core Group, to protect that reference, winning the support of a record number of 94 states.

Universal Periodic Review

As a strong supporter of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, the UK participated in all reviews in 2020 (28 in total) raising priority human rights concerns. During Turkey's review in January, we expressed concern^{[[footnote 50](#)]} about the harassment and imprisonment of journalists. We urged the Turkish Government to remove obstacles to freedom of expression, including by repealing criminal defamation laws and we welcomed Turkey's acceptance of our recommendation on combatting child, early and forced marriage. During the Belarus review in November^{[[footnote 51](#)]}, we condemned the arbitrary detention, violence against and intimidation of peaceful protesters, independent journalists, and members of the opposition. We urged the Government of Belarus to hold those responsible to account, engage in constructive dialogue, and fully implement the recommendations in the OSCE Moscow Mechanism report. During Libya's review in November^{[[footnote 52](#)]}, we expressed concern about indiscriminate attacks, unlawful killings, sexual and gender-based violence, risks to migrants and refugees, and the silencing of journalists, activists and human rights defenders. We urged the Libyan Government to do its part to commit to implementing the ceasefire and to the UN-led political process.

Treaty monitoring bodies and special procedures

The UK supports the work of the UN's expert human rights mechanisms, including the treaty monitoring bodies (bodies of experts set up to monitor state compliance with their human rights treaty obligations), and special procedures (expert individuals or groups mandated by the [HRC](#) to monitor and review specific country or thematic issues). We encourage all states 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](#) resolution 5/2.

UN Security Council

The UN Security Council ([UNSC](#)) has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. It comprises five permanent members (China, France, Russia, the US and the UK) and ten non-permanent members.

The UK takes the maximum opportunity of its position on the [UNSC](#) to promote human rights objectives. In 2020, the UK voted for UN Security Council Resolution 2532 on COVID-19, supporting the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire in armed conflicts and his appeal to open up spaces for diplomacy, protect the most vulnerable, allow humanitarian access, and focus our collective energies on fighting COVID-19. The UK acted as 'penholder' on [UNSC](#) resolutions on Colombia, Cyprus, Iraq/Kuwait, the Lake Chad Basin, Libya, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan (together with Germany), Yemen, the Protection of Civilians, and Women Peace and Security ([UNSCR 1325](#)). We pressed for discussions at the [UNSC](#) on serious human rights violations and abuses where these constituted a concern for international peace and security.

Responsibility to Protect and Mass Atrocity Prevention

The Responsibility to Protect ([R2P](#)) is a political commitment adopted by all UN Member States at the UN World Summit in New York in 2005. [R2P](#) focuses on the responsibility of member states to protect populations from mass atrocities (genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing).

In September, the UK voted to support [R2P](#) being a formal agenda item at the UN General Assembly. We co-sponsored two resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council on the prevention of genocide and commemorating the fifteenth anniversary of the Responsibility to Protect.

In 2020, we worked with our international partners to drive policy, playing a leading role on Myanmar, Libya, Syria and Yemen in the UN Security Council. The UK advocated [R2P](#) in international fora, and the sharing of best practice to drive up standards and levels of protection.

We funded the work of both the joint UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect (£355,000) and the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (£75,000).

Peacebuilding

The UK is one of the strongest supporters of the Secretary-General's Sustaining Peace agenda, which aims to promote inclusive peacebuilding and tackle drivers of conflict. During 2020, we supported the Peacebuilding Architecture Review (PBAR) through strong participation in negotiations, and by funding consultation on the role of the International Financial Institutions in driving long-term approaches to peacebuilding. At the conclusion of the PBAR, we played a key role in negotiating the twin resolutions in the Security Council and the General Assembly, ensuring that inclusion and human rights remained critical to UN efforts to build peace in fragile settings.

We continued to be an active member of the Peacebuilding Commission, including in the development of its Gender Strategy Action Plan and supported the Peacebuilding Fund as a critical tool in UN efforts to tackle the drivers of conflict in fragile countries. We funded the Humanitarian Development Peace Partnership Facility, which drives UN-World Bank cooperation on addressing root causes of conflict through joint assessments. We advocated that the UN should improve the effectiveness of UN Special Political Missions, mediation functions, UN Country Teams, and Resident Coordinator functions, and should draw more coherence between its operational arms and agencies, such as UNDP. Through our support to the UN Peace and Development Advisers programme, we helped advance discussions on human rights in fragile and conflict-affected states.

Peacekeeping

UN peacekeeping helps countries navigate the difficult path from conflict to peace. Its 13 missions in 2020 deployed over 90,000 personnel, supporting political processes, protecting hundreds of thousands of civilians and laying the groundwork for sustainable peace.

The UK is a leading contributor to the delivery and reform of peacekeeping. In the Security Council, we ensured that mission mandates prioritised the protection of civilians and their protection from human rights violations and abuses. As co-penholder with Germany, we secured the smooth drawdown of the UN-African Union hybrid operation in Darfur (UNAMID) in Sudan, and established the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission Sudan (UNITAMS), the follow-on special political mission. We continued to push for enhanced pledges of personnel and equipment, and stronger performance throughout missions supporting the Secretary-General's Action for Peacekeeping initiative.

The UK deployed 300 troops to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), in support of the mission's mandated objectives to protect civilians and support sustainable peace in Mali. The UK also continued to provide training for police- and troop-contributing countries compliant with human rights standards.

The impact of war falls primarily on civilians, particularly women and children. Women peacekeepers improve the effectiveness and efficiency of peacekeeping missions and their ability to protect civilians and uphold human rights. In the 20th anniversary year of the first women, peace and security resolution, the UK committed a further £2.5 million to the Elsie Initiative to increase the number of uniformed women in peacekeeping and build more inclusive peace operations.

Commonwealth

Since the creation of the modern Commonwealth in 1949, the promotion of peace, democracy and human rights has been central to members' shared purpose. The UK hosted the 25th Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting ([CHOGM](#)) in 2018, when it assumed the responsibility of Commonwealth Chair-in-Office. In September 2020, we published a Chair-in-Office report^{[\[footnote 53\]](#)} setting out how UK leadership had supported the delivery of [CHOGM](#) 2018 commitments, including on human rights.

Following the postponement of [CHOGM](#) 2020, we look forward to the gathering of the Commonwealth family in Kigali for a rescheduled [CHOGM](#) when the global situation allows. In the meantime, the UK continues to work as Chair-in-Office.

Human Rights Council joint Commonwealth statement: a Commonwealth first

In October 2020, Rita French, the UK's International Ambassador for Human Rights, delivered a joint statement^{[\[footnote 54\]](#)} on behalf of all 54 member states of the Commonwealth at the UN Human Rights Council ([HRC](#)), reflecting their strong collective commitment to the core Commonwealth values of human rights and the rule of law. This marked the first time that the Commonwealth as a group had addressed the [HRC](#).

The UK continued to fund two resident human rights advisers at the Commonwealth Small States Office (CSSO) in Geneva. They provided technical assistance to Commonwealth small states in their engagement with the Human Rights Council. This support helped Commonwealth member states including The Gambia, Fiji, Guyana, Grenada, Kiribati and Malawi with their engagement in the Universal

Periodic Review reporting system (UPRR). The Solomon Islands and Vanuatu also received specific technical assistance to draft and deliver statements at several HRC sessions.

The UK supported the sharing of human rights best practice and expertise, through its continued funding of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in its role as chair of the Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions (CFNHRI). Through the Pacific Commonwealth Equality Project, which ran from July 2019 until March 2020, the UK, in partnership with the Pacific Community Regional Rights Resource Team, supported the establishment and strengthening of National Human Rights Institutions in the Pacific, including by sharing the experiences of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

Commonwealth COVID-19 and racism statements

In July 2020, Commonwealth Heads of Government—on the UK's initiative—issued a joint Commonwealth statement^[footnote 55] on the full range of international responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences. Heads committed to ensure that response measures did not disproportionately impact on the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Commonwealth citizens, and reaffirmed their unwavering commitment to the core values and principles set out in the Commonwealth Charter.

The Foreign Secretary chaired a virtual Commonwealth Foreign Affairs Ministers Meeting (CFAMM) in October 2020, after which—again on the UK's initiative—the Ministers issued a strong joint statement on racism^[footnote 56]—committing Commonwealth members to accelerate efforts to address the causes of racism and racial discrimination.

Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group

Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, as Minister for the Commonwealth, represented the UK at meetings of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) in March and October 2020. 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.

Gender equality and inclusion

The UK worked closely with a range of partners to protect and promote the rights of L.G.B.T.+ people in Commonwealth countries, including the Equality and Justice Alliance (EJA)—a consortium of NGOs advancing equality and equal protection before the law for women, girls and L.G.B.T.+ people across the Commonwealth. Projects supported by the UK in 2020 included: technical assistance programmes in a number of countries supporting the review and drafting of legislation covering issues such as hate crimes, discrimination and online abuse; capacity-building for civil society organisations; and a series of dialogues and knowledge exchanges across Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific and Asia.

In November 2020, to mark the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon hosted a virtual event celebrating the UK-supported Women Mediators across the Commonwealth Network and the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN).

Europe

Council of Europe

The UK is a founder member of the Council of Europe (CoE) and one of five major financial contributors (€33.8 million in 2020). Our membership continued to provide an important platform for the promotion and protection of human rights, democracy and the rule of law across Europe.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, eleven member States derogated from European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) obligations; the UK maintained that such emergency measures should be time-sensitive, proportionate and exercised only to the extent strictly necessary. The UK highlighted the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups, and shared best practice in upholding equality.

The UK continued to oppose discrimination on any grounds, including calling for greater protection of L.G.B.T.+ rights in member States. In February, the UK coordinated a statement highlighting the importance of combatting discrimination and persecution based on religion or belief. The UK also delivered national statements on issues such as anti-racism, the death penalty and gender equality.

In November, the Committee of Ministers, the intergovernmental arm of the CoE, held its annual Ministerial-level meeting virtually, coinciding with the 70th anniversary of the ECHR. In his intervention, the Minister of State with responsibility for the Council of Europe, James Cleverly, urged the CoE to do more to support member States in ensuring equality of access to justice for all. He also called on the Russian Federation to respect the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine.

The UK continued to press Russia to fulfil all its obligations as a CoE member State, and expressed concern regarding amendments to its foreign agents' law, and designations under its undesirable organisations law.

The UK also expressed concern at Turkey's delayed implementation of European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) judgments regarding the imprisonment of human rights activists and opposition politicians, and joined calls for the immediate release of Osman Kavala and Selahattin Demirtas.

The UK noted the interim resolution in the McKerr group of cases before the ECtHR and remained committed to keeping the Council informed of progress in all UK cases.

In the ECtHR, the number of cases brought against the UK decreased to 301, down from 344 in 2019; those that went to a judgment remained low, as did the number of judgments that found violations. The Court's ongoing caseload increased to 62,000 at the end of 2020. The UK continued to advocate reform of the Court, to allow it to concentrate on the most important cases before it.

In 2021, the UK will again support the use of all CoE mechanisms both to put pressure on and to support member States to meet their ECHR obligations.

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) provides a forum for dialogue, including on human rights, rule of law and democratic governance, between the 57 participating States.

Despite COVID-19, the OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) was able to conduct electoral observation missions, although limited missions were only possible in some States. The exceptional circumstances, however, prevented the annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting from taking place in September.

In April, 43 participating States joined a UK-led statement on gender concerns and COVID-19^[footnote 57]. The UK also delivered a national statement on human rights and COVID-19^[footnote 58]. During the year, the UK delivered national statements about human rights issues in various OSCE participating States, including Russia, Belarus and Turkey^[footnote 59].

In the Permanent Council of the OSCE, the UK condemned Russia's violations of human rights in illegally annexed Crimea. We also raised human rights violations in non-government controlled eastern Ukraine, Georgia's breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova. During the escalation of military hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, we called on all parties to respect international humanitarian law.

In September, the UK led a group of 17 participating States to invoke the Moscow Mechanism to establish an independent investigation into allegations of electoral and human rights violations in Belarus. The appointed expert, Professor Wolfgang Benedek, concluded that the electoral processes had been fraudulent, that the results had been falsified, and that the Belarusian authorities and security forces had perpetrated sustained and systematic violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The UK supported the Albanian OSCE Chair to deliver shared human rights priorities, including the prevention of torture, on which the OSCE agreed a Ministerial Council Decision. Lord Pickles, Special Envoy for Post-Holocaust issues, led the UK delegation to the Tirana High Level Conference on Combatting Antisemitism in the OSCE region. Our support also included increasing the focus on human rights considerations in UK-chaired meetings of the Security Committee.

Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama hosted the OSCE's first online Ministerial Council in December. In the plenary, the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, called for the implementation in full of the recommendations of Professor Benedek's report on Belarus. The UK organised a side event to discuss the implementation of Professor Benedek's recommendations, with an intervention from the Minister for European Neighbourhood and the Americas, Wendy Morton MP. The Foreign Secretary also urged Russia to implement the 2018 Moscow Mechanism report's recommendations on Chechnya, including ending the systematic persecution of LGBT+ people.

In 2021, the UK will work with Sweden, the incoming OSCE Chair, to address ongoing challenges, including on priority areas of enhancing democracy and gender equality in the OSCE region.

European Union

Following our departure from the EU on 31 January, the UK continued to work with the EU on shared human rights objectives, and engaged regularly with the EU on human rights situations of concern around the world.

In March, the UK Co-ordinator for the Global Media Freedom campaign, Alastair King Smith, visited Brussels to discuss the UK's media freedom priorities and the Media Freedom Coalition with EU partners.

As part of the events to mark the 20th Anniversary of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, the UK Mission to the EU co-hosted a roundtable entitled 'Gender, Climate and Conflict: Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in a vulnerable world' together with partner organisations.

In November, Minister for Human Rights, Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, met the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore, to exchange views on human rights priorities. The meeting reiterated our shared commitment to advancing the human rights agenda, and paved the way for future discussions.

In December, the EU agreed and published its Action Plan on Human Rights 2020-2024, citing many areas of shared interest between the EU and the UK, such as freedom of religion or belief, media freedom and the promotion of gender equality.

The UK welcomed the launch of the EU's global human rights sanctions Regime in December, having established our own autonomous equivalent regime in July. This development provides an opportunity for the UK and the EU to work together on human rights sanctions where it is in our shared interests to do so.

In 2021, the UK will continue to work together with the EU, identifying opportunities to drive forward our shared priorities. Since March 2020, UK Ambassador for Human Rights, Rita French worked as part of a group of 10 European Human Rights Ambassadors to issue joint statements on pressing human rights issues of mutual importance. In 2020, the group released 16 joint statements covering areas such as women's rights, media freedom, LGBT+ rights and freedom of assembly. These also included country-specific statements and support for individual human rights defenders in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

International criminal justice

A central element of UK foreign policy is supporting international criminal justice and accountability. Those who commit the most serious crimes of international concern must be held accountable.

During 2020, the UK provided practical and financial support to the International Criminal Court, contributing £10.7 million and cooperating on sentence enforcement and witness protection. A notable success was the election in December of Judge Joanna Korner QC to the Court.



Foreign Secretary meets Judge Joanna Korner during her campaign for election to the ICC, September 2020.

Concerns over the performance of the Court, raised by the UK and others, led to the establishment of the Independent Expert Review, which reported in September. The review made a number of recommendations to improve the governance of the Court, the working methods of the judiciary, and the process of investigations and prosecutions. States Parties have agreed a process to implement the recommendations, together with the principal organs of the Court—the Office of the Prosecutor, the Judiciary, and the Registry. The UK will be influential in ensuring that the recommendations are implemented through its election to the Bureau of the Assembly of States Parties^{[\[footnote 60\]](#)}.

The Prosecutor concluded four Preliminary Examinations in 2020. In respect of Palestine, the Prosecutor concluded that the criteria had been met to proceed to an investigation, subject to a jurisdictional ruling from the Pre-Trial Chamber. In the case of Iraq, the Prosecutor concluded that there was no basis under the Rome Statute to proceed to a full investigation and formally closed the Preliminary Examination. The Prosecutor found that the UK's investigations into alleged crimes by UK soldiers in Iraq were genuine, and so would not proceed to its own investigation. In the situations in Nigeria and Ukraine, the Prosecutor sought authorisation to proceed to a full investigation.

The UK continues to support international efforts to gather, analyse and preserve evidence of atrocities committed, to ensure that genuine accountability remains possible. This includes through the UN International Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) and the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM).

The UK also continued to support the work of the UN Investigative Team for the Accountability of Daesh (UNITAD), which collects, preserves, and stores evidence in Iraq of acts which may amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide committed by Daesh in Iraq.

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. Although affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Stanisic and Simatovic retrial was ongoing throughout 2020, closing arguments were heard in April 2021 and we await the judgment. The Ratko Mladic appeal against his conviction genocide, crimes against humanity and violations of the laws and customs of war continued. Final hearings were held in August 2020 and a judgment is expected in 2021.

The UK also continued its support for the Residual Special Court for Sierra Leone (RSCSL) and for the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), as well as the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and the Kosovo Specialist Chambers.

Sanctions

Sanctions, such as arms embargoes, asset freezes and travel bans, are one of the instruments the UK uses 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 the maximum impact on sanctions targets, while continuing to support legitimate humanitarian activities.

In July, the UK established the Global Human Rights sanctions regime (GHR). This provides a powerful tool to deter and provide accountability for serious human rights violations or abuses around the world. To coincide with the launch, the UK imposed sanctions on 49 individuals and entities in Russia, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar and DPRK involved in some of the most notorious human rights violations and abuses in recent years. This included designations in relation to the mistreatment and death of Sergei Magnitsky and the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. In September, the UK, alongside Canada, imposed sanctions on Alexander Lukashenko and seven other members of the senior

Belarusian leadership for serious human rights violations in Belarus. On International Human Rights Day, in coordinated action with the US, the UK announced designations under the [GHR](#) against ten individuals and one entity from Chechnya, Venezuela, The Gambia and Pakistan for involvement in serious human rights violations, including torture and murder.



Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, Sergei Magnitsky's widow and son Natalia and Nikita and Bill Browder, Head of the Global Magnitsky Justice Campaign, following the launch of the UK's Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime in July 2020.

The UK also took action in response to human rights violations and abuses under other sanctions regimes. In February, the UK, with France, the US and Germany, co-designated Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) warlord, Seka Baluku, under the UN DRC regime. This marked the first individual to be sanctioned under the UN DRC regime for gender-based violence, and one of a small number worldwide.

In February, the UK worked with EU partners to impose sanctions on eight businesspeople and two entities profiting from the conflict in Syria at the expense of ordinary Syrians. In addition to designating those responsible under the UK's Global Human Rights sanctions regime, the UK also supported the EU's sanctions on individuals and entities that supported the political repression in Belarus. In October, the UK implemented EU sanctions to enforce asset freezes and travel bans against those responsible for the poisoning of Russian anti-corruption and democracy activist, Alexey Navalny.

On 31 December, at the end of the Transition Period, the vast majority of those designated under EU sanctions regimes were designated under UK autonomous sanctions regimes. In 2021, the UK will pursue an independent sanctions policy, driven by UK foreign policy interests, including human rights priorities. In addition to [GHR](#), there are 15 UK autonomous geographic sanctions regimes with a human rights element. Work began on a corruptions sanctions regime, which was subsequently launched in April 2021.

Chapter 3: Consular assistance

The provision of consular assistance is at the heart of the [F.C.D.O.](#)'s commitment to protect the interests of British nationals worldwide. In addition to helping thousands of British nationals return to the UK, in 2020 our consular staff provided professional, non-judgemental assistance in over 27,300 new cases and around 9,100 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 1,985 people detained overseas, and provided information and advice in over 750 potential cases of forced marriage. We continued to support victims of crime, including those who had suffered rape and sexual assault, and those bereaved through murder and manslaughter overseas.

In January, we hosted a workshop to bring together the different agencies and organisations involved when a British national is killed overseas, ahead of launching a working group to improve information sharing and coordination. In September, the [F.C.D.O.](#), Chief Coroner for England and Wales, and National Police Chiefs Council, renewed a Memorandum of Understanding on Murder, Manslaughter and Infanticide of British nationals Abroad^{[\[footnote 61\]](#)}. This explained the type of support available to bereaved families and clarified the role of the [F.C.D.O.](#), the police, and coroners in England and Wales. In 2021, we shall continue to work with the Ministry of Justice and others to improve our services, responding to feedback, including from the Victims' Commissioner's report 'Struggling for Justice'^{[\[footnote 62\]](#)} and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Deaths Abroad and Consular Assistance.

Death penalty

The UK government opposes the use of the death penalty and judicial corporal punishment in all circumstances, as a matter of principle.

Where a British national is sentenced to death, or is facing a charge that carries the death penalty, with their permission, we normally intervene at whatever level and stage is considered most effective to prevent their execution. As at December 2020, the [F.C.D.O.](#) was providing consular assistance to ten British nationals sentenced to death overseas, and to a further 40 British nationals detained on charges

which could attract the death penalty if they were found guilty.

We work closely with legal teams engaged by British nationals facing the death penalty, and are assisted in this by Reprieve and the Death Penalty Project (DPP), two NGOs that provide legal assistance and advice to those facing the death penalty abroad. In 2021, we shall continue to intervene in death penalty cases where necessary and seek opportunities to support local efforts to abolish the death penalty.

Torture and mistreatment

The UK takes all allegations of torture or mistreatment of British nationals very seriously. Between January and December 2020, British nationals reported 91 new allegations of torture or mistreatment overseas to consular staff. Our priority in such cases is the safety of the individual involved. Where we receive allegations of torture and mistreatment, we attempt to make contact with the individual concerned as soon as possible, and will follow up with action appropriate to the circumstances of the case. For example, if the person is detained or hospitalised, our support might include increasing the frequency of our visits or calls, assisting the individual to gain access to medical treatment, or taking up complaints about ill-treatment or personal safety with the prison authorities.

While we cannot investigate torture or mistreatment allegations overseas, we can, with the individual's consent, raise such allegations with the local authorities, demanding an end to the mistreatment, the investigation of the incident in line with international standards, and that the perpetrators should be brought to justice. When responding to an allegation, 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 an individual does not want to raise the allegations immediately, we can help them to do so at a later date, for example, after they have returned to the UK.

Furthermore, we hold regular reviews of all such cases, to develop strategies to engage the local authorities and identify regional trends which the FCO can address. In December 2020, we reviewed a total of 124 open cases. We also continued to train staff on relevant international obligations, including in relation to fair trial standards, and on the appropriate action to take when receiving an allegation of torture or mistreatment.

Overseas prisoners

As well as 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 about the standard of investigative or judicial proceedings.



As at December 2020, the FCO provided consular assistance in 1,985 cases of British nationals who had been arrested or detained overseas (including those in police custody, in immigration detention, on remand, and sentenced prisoners). We continued to work closely with, as well as part fund, Prisoners Abroad, an NGO offering emotional and practical support to British detainees overseas and to their families in the UK and abroad. In 2020, we worked together on over 1,200 cases, including those involving vulnerable detainees. This work included helping detainees access information about COVID-19 and, in some locations, enabling access to hygiene products such as soap, masks and hand sanitiser.

We also considered how we could mitigate the impact of visiting restrictions, introduced in response to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, on consular access, which remained a key means through which consular staff monitor the welfare of British nationals detained abroad. From March to November, we undertook lobbying initiatives across the globe, to secure regular remote access to British nationals by telephone or video facility, including in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In Pakistan, consular staff adapted to local movement restrictions by using remote engagement with both the detention centre and the British national to ensure the local authorities provided appropriate medical treatment for an unwell British detainee. In Abu Dhabi, by communicating to British detainees through family members and over the telephone, we ensured British national detainees knew how to raise concerns and maintained regular contact with them. In Dubai police stations, we conducted a programme of virtual visits to ensure British detainees were offered consular assistance. Iran continued to deny consular access to dual nationals in detention. During 2020, the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, raised

repeatedly with the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif the cases of a number of British-Iranians detained in Iran. 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.

Consular staff across the globe undertook such efforts to ensure regular remote access to British nationals in detention, allowing us to maintain high standards of consular assistance while respecting local lockdown measures and upholding the safety of staff.

Forced marriage

The UK remains a world leader in the fight to tackle forced marriage, with the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU), a joint FCO and Home Office unit, leading efforts to combat the practice at home and abroad. In 2020, the FMU provided advice or support related to a possible forced marriage in over 750 cases relating to 55 countries, including the UK. This represented a decrease in cases of approximately 44% compared with 2019. This is thought to be largely attributable to reasons flowing from the coronavirus pandemic, such as restrictions on weddings and overseas travel, which were in place at various points from March 2020.

The FMU continued to deliver outreach and training events in the UK to a wide range of agencies, safeguarding professionals and health officials. After March, all outreach was conducted virtually. It included a series of bespoke virtual workshops developed for frontline police officers and, for the first time, officials from social services. We held two training workshops for police officers in 2020, and have now provided training to officers in 38 police forces. 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. The FMU increased its activities on social media and updated its publications, such as its 'Forced Marriage: A Survivors Handbook'^[footnote 63]. The UK continued to fund NGOs, based both overseas and in the UK, to provide refuge for those at risk abroad, and to support victims of forced marriage who have returned from overseas.

Chapter 4: Human rights priority countries

Afghanistan

Rising violent conflict, terror attacks and a significant increase in insecurity across Afghanistan continued to be major obstacles to the progress of human rights in the country. Serious violations of human rights, enabled through weak institutional governance and poor implementation of the legislative and judicial framework, threatened media freedom, safety of religious minority groups and women's rights.

A UN report documented 8,820 civilian casualties in 2020, more than in any other country^[footnote 64]. Anti-government elements—predominantly the Taliban and Islamic State-Khorasan Province—caused the majority of civilian casualties. Despite the start of peace talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban in September, Taliban violence was higher than for the same period in previous years.

Targeted violence by terrorist groups against government employees, human rights defenders, activists and journalists increased significantly in late 2020. The UN reported that 23 human rights defenders and media workers were killed during 2020^[footnote 65], including nine in the final quarter of the year, despite the start of peace negotiations on 12 September. Women in the public sector and the media, as well as civilian women and girls, have continued to be targeted. This increasing trend of targeted violence generates fear and self-censorship amongst the population. The UK called for a reduction in violence leading to a sustainable ceasefire, and stressed the importance of compliance with international humanitarian law. The UK supported the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces to deliver more effective, accountable and human rights-compliant security to protect and assist Afghan citizens, including particularly vulnerable sectors of society.

Gender-based violence (GBV) remained a major concern. This issue was exacerbated by entrenched cultural attitudes, limited access to justice and COVID-19 lockdowns. The UK continued to fund GBV response services in six target provinces, including medical and psychosocial assistance, referrals to legal services, and shelter for GBV survivors.

Access to schooling in rural areas for girls, especially in districts controlled by the Taliban, remained challenging. Girls reported that COVID-19 lockdowns left them at higher risk of GBV, and poverty, with an increased burden of household tasks, heightened levels of anxiety and depression, and disruption to their learning. UK Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) projects prioritised ensuring girls' safety and well-being, and innovating remote learning mechanisms. The second phase of the GEC helped more than 70,000 marginalised girls from 2019 to 2020 access education and skills training.

Women continued to have an increasingly active role in government, law, media, business and security. In July, a government decree approved a proposal to appoint women deputy governors in all Afghanistan's 34 provinces. Eight women had been appointed by the end of 2020. Campaigners for women's rights achieved a significant victory in September when the Government approved a law allowing mothers' names as well as fathers' to appear on national identity cards.

The UK's Peace and Reconciliation Programme in Afghanistan, supported through the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), promoted women's meaningful participation in discussions on peace. In 2020, it focused on capacity-building support to the State Ministry of Peace, women's networks, and other civil society organisations.

Freedom of worship is enshrined in the Afghan Constitution, but religious minorities continued to face discrimination and experienced increasing insecurity. Following a deadly attack on a Sikh Gurdwara in Kabul in March, over 400 Sikhs left Afghanistan. In November, the first attack in nearly 20 years in the predominantly Hazara Shia Muslim city of Bamiyan caused mass casualties. Officials from the British Embassy in Kabul met representatives from ethnic minority groups to hear their concerns. During a virtual visit to Afghanistan in November, Rita French, UK International Ambassador for Human Rights, met members of the Hazara community to discuss the challenges they faced, and to reaffirm the UK's commitment in support of members of minority communities.

The Afghan media continued to be diverse and independent. The UK championed media freedom and UK officials regularly discussed issues with NGOs and journalists. With UK support, Second Vice President Sarwar Danesh signed the Global Pledge on Media Freedom for Afghanistan in January. In July, following pressure from media and embassies in Kabul, the Afghan parliament rejected proposed legislative amendments that would have restricted the media landscape. However, the country remained a deadly place for journalists. Six Afghan journalists and media workers were killed by anti-government elements in targeted attacks. Individuals and media outlets received threats, or were forced to censor their output, and a number of journalists—mostly women—fled Afghanistan.

At the Afghanistan 2020 Geneva Conference in November, the UK pledged further development assistance for 2021 to support essential services to the Afghan people. Our development partnership with the Government is based on principles in the Afghanistan Partnership Framework and sets out the importance of focusing on poverty reduction, progress in the peace process, tackling corruption, protection of women, the rights of members of minority groups, and human rights in general.

In 2021, the UK will continue to urge both parties to the peace talks to ensure that any future settlement protects and expands the progress made on human rights, including protection for women and members of minority groups. We hope that peace talks will lead to a sustainable political settlement and a better future for the people of Afghanistan.

Bahrain

Bahrain responded progressively to the human rights implications of COVID-19, particularly concerning prisoners and migrant workers. The Bahrain Government also began drafting an integrated National Human Rights Action Plan. Challenges remained around freedom of expression and the death penalty.

The death penalty remained a punishment for certain crimes. No executions were carried out in 2020, but Bahrain's Court of Cassation did uphold the death penalty for four individuals, with no further avenue for appeal. The Minister responsible for human rights, Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister for the Middle East and North Africa James Cleverly, and the UK Ambassador to Bahrain Roddy Drummond each restated to senior members of the Bahrain Government the UK's firm opposition to the death penalty in all circumstances as a matter of principle.

Despite constitutional guarantees, Bahrain's approach to freedom of expression continued to be of concern, with the country dropping one place to 169 out of 180 countries in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index^[footnote 66]. Protections for journalists and bloggers, and a culture of self-censorship, were the key issues. It was encouraging that Reuters and AFP gained representation in Bahrain. However, challenges persisted for international journalists seeking access to the country. A revised press law, to provide additional protections for journalists, did not gain parliamentary approval, and the timing and detail of the planned legislation remained vague, particularly regarding social media.

Allegations of human rights violations mainly focused on reports of torture, unsafe convictions, and the rights and treatment of detainees. There was increasingly transparent reporting by Bahrain's oversight bodies, including through the Annual Ombudsman Report, and the UK continued to advocate thorough investigations and reports that would meet international standards.

Bahrain's response to COVID-19 demonstrated a welcome focus on protecting the rights of vulnerable people and safeguarding wider society. The Government made access to medical treatment for COVID-19 available free of charge to all Bahrain citizens and residents, including the migrant worker community. In recognition of the economic impact of the pandemic on migrant workers, the Government also introduced a visa amnesty from March to December, resulting in the "normalisation of status" for over 30,000 workers who might otherwise have lost their jobs. It also provided cash assistance to those unable to work. In line with World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines, by introducing video calls Bahrain took early action to ensure that detainees continued to have safe access to medical facilities and contact with family members. From April until the end of the year, there were approximately 10,000 (physical and virtual) healthcare consultations in Bahrain's detention centres. We welcomed these actions.

The prison population was reduced significantly, both by 169 royal pardons, and by increased use of alternative sentencing legislation, which led to the release of over 900 prisoners from custodial sentences. By the end of 2020, over 4,200 detainees had benefitted from alternative sentencing. The UK welcomed the release in May of activist Nabeel Rajab from detention into an alternative sentence. After his release, Mr Rajab worked with Bahrain's National Institute for Human Rights, using social media to provide details of his work and accounts of community projects, and to explain his recent experiences in prison. We encouraged the Bahrain authorities to monitor the broader impact of alternative sentencing, such as re-offending rates, and to consider new ways of supporting former offenders.

Under the chairmanship of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, Bahrain's High Coordination Committee for Human Rights began the process of drafting Bahrain's first National Human Rights Action Plan (NHRAP). This involved seeking the views and active participation of domestic and international stakeholders, in a series of thematic human rights workshops. Participants included Lord Ahmad and Jennifer Townson, UK Migration and Modern Slavery Envoy, and a range of senior officials from the UN and other international bodies. In December, Rita French, UK International Ambassador for Human Rights, visited Bahrain virtually and discussed the NHRAP, and engaged on issues including women's rights and migrant labour. In 2021 we look forward to the finalisation and implementation of the NHRAP, to deliver further reforms in Bahrain.

People's Republic of Bangladesh

There was no overall improvement in the human rights situation in Bangladesh in 2020. Key concerns included further restrictions of freedom of expression, including the use of the Digital Security Act (DSA) to suppress criticism of the Bangladesh Government's COVID-19 response, and continued violence against women and girls.

Political freedom remained restricted. The Dhaka City Corporation elections in February were marred by widespread allegations of voter intimidation and attacks on opposition candidates. The Government criticised the UK High Commission and other diplomatic missions for observing the elections. There were further incidents of violence and allegations of intimidation and voter suppression during by-elections in November.

In March, opposition leader Khaleda Zia was released from prison following a government decision to suspend her sentence for six months on the condition that she received medical treatment at home and did not travel abroad. She remained under house arrest in Dhaka throughout 2020, following an extension to her suspension in September.

Local human rights groups estimated that law enforcement agencies were responsible for 225 extra judicial killings, including 'crossfires' and incidents of torture. In August, following the killing of a retired army officer by police, extra-judicial killings received unprecedented public attention and the number reported dropped. There were at least 31 reported cases of enforced disappearances. Two executions were reported, and 218 death sentences were handed down, compared with 327 in 2019^[footnote 67].

Media freedom remained under pressure. Bangladesh dropped to 151 (out of 180) in the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index^[footnote 68], its lowest ever position. According to NQO Article 19, 198 cases were brought under the DSA against 451 individuals. 75 journalists were charged in 41 cases, and at least 32 journalists were arrested. Over 400 other people, including health professionals and people critical of the Government's handling of COVID-19, were charged under the DSA. A journalist investigating an Awami League-linked prostitution ring disappeared for 53 days, and was arrested when found near the Indian border.

The UK supported the second conference of the Bangladesh Broadcast Journalist Centre, where broadcast journalists and expert panellists discussed the protection of journalists and media freedom. On the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists in November, the UK co-hosted a virtual pre-conference alongside Article 19 South Asia and the Canadian High Commission, to prepare for the second Global Conference for Media Freedom. UK programme funds supported a project to help journalists reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic.

UK programme funds supported a number of other human rights priorities, including democratic governance and tackling modern slavery. The UK-funded Death Penalty Project examined socio-economic profiles of death row prisoners, aiming to help shape debate with policy makers and civil society on abolishing the death penalty. F.C.D.O. programming also helped address governance issues under the Access to Justice and Securing Political Participation programmes.

While the Government continued to give strong support to religious freedom, religious minorities, including Ahmadiyya Muslims and Hindus, reported that they had been targeted by extremists who used section 28(2) of the DSA (harming religious sentiment) to file cases against them. There were attacks on 67 minority places of worship, including temples, monasteries and statues. Hindus reported incidents of land grabbing, particularly following demonstrations against France in November. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Mro indigenous people demonstrated in November against plans to construct a five-star hotel which threatened to displace them from their ancestral lands.

Violence against women remained a major problem. Local human rights groups reported that 1,627 women had been raped. Human rights activists blamed the absence of effective law enforcement, exacerbated by COVID-19, for the increase in cases of rape. In October, in response to high profile cases and unprecedented large-scale demonstrations against sexual violence, the Government approved an amendment allowing for the death penalty in rape cases. The UK worked with partners to press for better implementation of legislation to protect and promote the status of women and girls. UK-funded NGOs and civil society groups led nationwide advocacy against growing sexual violence towards women and children, and demanded justice for survivors.

We recognised and commended the fact Bangladesh continued to host around 860,000 Rohingya refugees in its Cox's Bazar District. In April and May, the Bangladesh authorities rescued several boatloads of refugees from the Bay of Bengal. Some were taken to Bhasan Char, an island in the Bay of Bengal developed as a facility for refugees by the Government. In December, two groups of refugees were relocated from Cox's Bazar to Bhasan Char. The UK and other partners continued to call for technical and protection assessments by the UN to evaluate the safety and sustainability of Bhasan Char. In the Cox's Bazar refugee camps, restrictions on internet access hindered humanitarian operations and public health messaging around COVID-19 throughout 2020. The impact of COVID-19 in the camps was less than initially feared, with 367 reported cases and ten deaths^{[[footnote 69](#)]}.

In October, the UK co-hosted a virtual donor conference on the Rohingya crisis alongside the US, EU and UN, and pledged £37.5 million of new funding. This brought the total UK commitment to the Rohingya response in Bangladesh since August 2017 to £293.5 million. UK funding, delivered through UN agencies and NGOs, provided food, healthcare and clean water and sanitation for the Rohingya and host communities.

In 2021, the UK will continue to address governance and human rights concerns through diplomatic engagement and development programming.

Belarus

The human rights situation in Belarus seriously deteriorated in the run-up to and aftermath of the fraudulent Presidential election in August. Following the start of the election campaign in May, Belarusian authorities launched a sustained and brutal campaign involving the repression of democratic rights, human rights and fundamental freedoms. Belarusian security forces detained over 30,000 people, and more than 150 people faced politically motivated criminal charges. There were five fatalities associated with the crackdown.

Belarusian authorities prevented all non-sanctioned public gatherings and events. To enforce this, the authorities deployed violence, backed by the use of stun grenades, rubber bullets, tear gas and water cannon, to disperse large, peaceful gatherings. The Deputy Minister of Interior Gennady Kazakevich threatened the use of lethal weapons to disrupt protests and demonstrations further. The authorities introduced laws banning the wearing and display of opposition colours, and songs or poetry associated with the opposition movement. Breaches of this ban were treated as unauthorised demonstrations and punished by fines and arrests. Opposition figures were arrested and faced politically motivated criminal charges and, in some cases, they were forcibly exiled or fled abroad. This included leading opposition figure Svetlana Tikhonovskaya. The Belarusian Catholic Archbishop, Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, was exiled for four months after speaking out against the government crackdowns.



Red and white opposition colours on display in protest against the Belarusian regime—March for Heroes, September 2020.

The regime arbitrarily detained tens of thousands of peaceful protesters. Human rights organisations, including Human Rights Watch and Viasna, issued reports on the appalling conditions and treatment of detainees. UN human rights experts made statements on reports of torture, threats of sexual violence, and other forms of physical and psychological torture inside detention centres. An investigatory report on Belarus by Professor Wolfgang Benedek, an appointed rapporteur under the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Moscow Mechanism, concluded that electoral and human rights violations had occurred on a massive and systematic scale. The authorities acted in an environment of impunity, with no investigations despite thousands of complaints of violations.

The UK condemned the actions of the Belarusian authorities. The UK was at the forefront of the international response to the fraudulent August election and the subsequent crackdown, including calling for an independent OSCE investigation through the Moscow Mechanism into human rights abuses and electoral fraud. We repeatedly urged the Belarusian authorities to cease their campaign of violence and harassment against journalists, human rights defenders and civil society actors. We also supported work to implement the recommendations of the OSCE's Moscow Mechanism report. On 24 August, we suspended defence cooperation with Belarus. On 29 September, we introduced sanctions against Lukashenko and his inner circle under the UK's Global Human Rights sanctions regime, as part of our coordinated international approach with Canada. On 18 December, we transitioned the EU sanctions regime on Belarus into UK law.

The Belarusian authorities deliberately targeted independent journalists and media organisations. There were more than 400 incidents of reported persecution of media actors. In 2020, Belarusian journalists collectively spent over 1,200 days in prison simply for doing their job. Members of the Press Club Belarus, an organisation working on improving journalistic standards, were arrested. Belarusian authorities denied or withdrew accreditation from journalists, including those working for foreign media. A leading independent media organisation, Tut.by, had its official media status removed. An increasing number of independent news websites were blocked, and the authorities routinely shut down internet access. The broadcasting equipment of many journalists was damaged or confiscated, and footage was deleted. From September, the UK doubled its financial support of £1.5 million to protect and develop civil society and independent media in Belarus, to provide a total of £3 million for 2020-22.

Belarus remained the only country in Europe to retain the death penalty. Four people remained on death row. In January, a new parliamentary working group was established to engage on the issue, but there was no outreach in 2020. The UK continued to lobby the Belarusian Government to establish a moratorium as a first step towards abolition of the death penalty, and condemned sentences. The British Embassy funded an Amnesty International exhibition that promoted the campaign against the death penalty in Belarus. With the help of the local human rights organisation Viasna, the exhibition was shown in cities across Belarus.

In 2021, the UK will continue to raise its concerns on the human rights situation both directly with the Belarusian Government and in multilateral fora, including the OSCE and the UN. We shall also continue supporting work to implement the recommendations of the OSCE Moscow Mechanism report.

Central African Republic

The human rights situation in the Central African Republic (CAR) deteriorated sharply ahead of milestone presidential and legislative elections in December. Armed group signatories to the 2019 Peace Agreement were the main perpetrators of violence. There were credible reports from the UN panel of experts of human rights violations and abuses, killings, conflict-related sexual violence, attacks against humanitarian personnel and UN peacekeepers, denial of humanitarian assistance, and recruitment of children into armed groups. The COVID-19 pandemic and escalating security concerns reduced monitoring of human rights violations and abuses, and also resulted in a temporary reduction of humanitarian assistance and disruption to CAR's main transport artery between Bangui and Douala, Cameroon.

State forces, including members of the CAR armed forces, the police and the gendarmerie, were alleged to be responsible for a range of human rights violations, and breaches of international humanitarian law, with women and children the main victims. Yao Agbetse, the UN Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in CAR, noted that one year after the signing of the Peace Agreement in February 2019, intermittent but serious incidents of violence and human rights abuses and violations continued to occur^[footnote 70].



Justice ambassadors, survivors of sexual violence and UK government staff standing outside the International Criminal Court—Bangui, CAR, March 2020.

Armed groups were responsible for the majority of reported human rights violations and abuses^[footnote 71], despite being signatories to the Peace Agreement and having publicly committed to the COVID-19 ceasefire called for by the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres. The Peace Agreement is an important framework for the protection of human rights in CAR.

The UK supported efforts towards building peace and stability in CAR through our £40, which includes a human rights division. We worked with international partners to ensure that protection of civilians remained at the core of the mission's mandate, including during the electoral period.

In both March and July 2020, the UK took robust action to protect the Peace Agreement along with all members of the UN Security Council (UNSC), by sanctioning the leaders of the FPC and 3R armed groups, who had been listed under the UN CAR sanctions regime.

In September, during the 45th session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), the UK co-sponsored a resolution on technical assistance and capacity-building for human rights in CAR, which was adopted by the HRC on 7 October. The resolution renewed the mandate of the UN Independent Expert for one year, and kept CAR on the Council agenda for future sessions^[footnote 72].

In October, at a high-level virtual event on CAR during the UN General Assembly, the Minister for Africa, James Duddridge, announced the UK's £500,000 contribution to the UN Development Programme's basket fund for CAR elections. This funding supported the political participation of women, youth and other marginalised groups in CAR's elections. The Minister for Africa also emphasised the importance of the CAR authorities and all actors respecting constitutional processes and using levers at their disposal to ensure peaceful, free, credible and inclusive elections.

On 17 December, an escalation in tensions led to six significant armed groups announcing the formation of 'The Coalition of Patriots for Change'. This coalition brought together armed groups which had previously been in violent conflict with one another, with the objective of destabilising elections. The coalition publicly denounced the Peace Agreement and succeeded in seizing control of a number of small towns, with Central African armed forces unable to fight back. The coalition prevented the deployment of critical election materials, disrupted the mobilisation of voters in pursuing their right to vote, and burned a number of polling stations.

The UN Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in the CAR, Yao Agbetse, confirmed that thousands of Central Africans had been victims of torture, ill-treatment or death threats for exercising their right to vote in the first round of elections on 27 December^[footnote 73]. Insecurity and fear of attacks related to elections caused the further displacement of 62,000 people within CAR's borders, and the flight of a further 30,000 into neighbouring Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad and Republic of Congo^[footnote 74].

On 24 December, the UK supported the UNSC's decision to redeploy 300 UN peacekeepers serving with the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and two helicopters to MINUSCA, in response to the escalation of violence in CAR. Throughout the electoral period, the UK used public statements at the UNSC to condemn the violence, deplore the many civilian and UN peacekeeping casualties^[footnote 75], and call for dialogue between all political actors in CAR. We also expressed our concern and disappointment that refugees from CAR had been excluded from voting.

In 2021, the UK will continue to push for the UNSC to remain engaged on CAR, in the aftermath of elections, and for a range of voices to be heard. We shall continue to support partners responding to the humanitarian crisis and advocate adherence to the Peace Agreement.

China

The human rights situation in China continued to deteriorate in 2020. Evidence grew of widespread and serious violations in Xinjiang against the Uyghur Muslims. The authorities continued to place extensive restrictions on media freedom, freedom of expression, and freedom of religion or belief. China's detention and poor treatment of human rights defenders (HRDs) persisted, as did restrictions preventing civil society from operating freely.

There was extensive evidence of the scale and severity of the human rights violations being perpetrated in Xinjiang. Leaked and publicly available Chinese government documents, satellite imagery analysis, and first-hand testimonies gave further evidence of 'political re-education camps'—where over a million Uyghurs and individuals from other ethnic minorities were detained—and of the region's expanding prison network. Visits by members of the British Embassy in Beijing corroborated open source reporting. Severe restrictions remained on the practice of religion and culture. Credible reports mounted of forced labour and forced birth control^[footnote 76]. Uyghurs overseas continued to report harassment and intimidation from the Chinese authorities.

Severe restrictions continued on culture, language, and freedom of religion or belief, movement, speech, and assembly in the Tibet Autonomous Region and other Tibetan areas. Access for foreign nationals—including diplomats and journalists—remained heavily circumscribed. New reports emerged of large-scale mandatory vocational training programmes^[footnote 77]. In Inner Mongolia, the authorities placed further restrictions on the Mongolian language in schools, leading to mass protests.

The Government maintained severe restrictions on media and internet freedoms. The authorities responded to the emergence of COVID-19 in Wuhan by censoring social media and silencing those who raised concerns, most notably Wuhan ophthalmologist Dr Li Wenliang. Citizen journalists, including Zhang Zhan, Chen Qiushi, and Fang Bin, were detained for their reporting: some remained missing by the end of the year. At least 47 journalists in China were in detention, more than in any other country. Intimidation and harassment of foreign journalists continued to grow, and over a dozen correspondents were expelled. Social media posts by the British Embassy in Beijing were censored on issues deemed 'sensitive' by the authorities.

Lawyers working on civil rights issues faced harassment and intimidation, including through revocation of their professional licenses. Lawyer Gao Zhisheng had been missing since 2017. Lawyer Yu Wensheng was tried in secret and sentenced to four years' imprisonment, followed by three years' deprivation of political rights, after almost three years in pre-trial detention. Reports continued of torture and mistreatment in detention, and in many cases detainees could not meet lawyers of their choosing. In a secret trial, Swedish national Gui Minhai was sentenced to ten years in prison.

The policy to 'sinicise' religion further restricted freedom of religion or belief. Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners and others continued to face persecution on the grounds of their religion or belief.

Independent civil society continued to face heavy restrictions: labour rights activists remained in detention, and one of China's leading LGBT+ organisations, Shanghai PRIDE, was pressured into closing in August. Staff from anti-discrimination NGO Changsha Funeng were tried on charges of subversion. Civil rights activists Xu Zhiyong and Ding Jiaxi and others detained in the '12.26 Crackdown' (of those participating in a meeting of civil rights lawyers and activists in December 2019) were also charged with subversion.

In May, the National People's Congress passed the 'Civil Code', which strengthened rights protection in some areas, including in the law relating to family, inheritance and torts. In July, a court upheld the verdict in favour of the plaintiff in China's first successful prosecution for sexual harassment.

The UK government continued to support projects to strengthen human rights in China, working with NGOs and institutions inside and outside the country. Diplomats tried to attend trials of HRDs and visited Xinjiang and other ethnic minority areas (including Ningxia, Qinghai, Gansu, and Inner Mongolia). At the UN, the UK raised concerns on a wide range of issues, most notably Xinjiang and Hong Kong, including by leading a joint statement at the UN Human Rights Council in June. For the first time since 2018, the UK devoted its entire 'Item 4' statement to one country: China. Ministers, including the Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab and Lord Tariq Ahmad, made public statements and consistently raised concerns directly with the Chinese authorities.

On Hong Kong, China breached the legally-binding Sino-British Joint Declaration twice in 2020. In June, China imposed a National Security Law on Hong Kong, violating Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy, and threatening directly the rights protected in the Joint Declaration. In November, China breached the Joint Declaration again by imposing new rules to disqualify elected legislators.

A number of pro-democracy supporters and activists were arrested during 2020 for illegal assembly after participating in 2019's anti-extradition law protests. Twelve candidates were barred from participating in legislative elections, apparently for their political views. According to local media, 40 people were arrested for national security offences, including the owner of one of Hong Kong's largest newspapers. The threat of national security charges was used to encourage self-censorship, restrict civil society and curtail freedom of speech.

The UK took a number of actions in response to the National Security Law: offering a new immigration path for British Nationals (Overseas); suspending the extradition treaty with Hong Kong; and extending the UK's arms embargo on mainland China to Hong Kong.

In 2021, the UK will continue to lead international efforts to hold China to account on priority issues, including Hong Kong and Xinjiang. We will press for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to have unfettered access to Xinjiang.

Colombia

While significant progress had been made since the signature of Colombia's landmark Peace Agreement in 2016, considerable human rights concerns remained, particularly around the high number of killings of human rights defenders (HRDs) and continued violence in some areas. The UN Secretary-General's Special Representative, Carlos Ruiz Massieu, identified these concerns as the biggest threat posed to the success of the Peace Agreement.

Although there was a reduction of the national homicide rate (from 25 to 23.7 per 100,000 persons in 2020, compared to 2019), killings increased in certain areas of the country throughout the year, largely where the Peace Agreement's crop substitution programme and the PDETs (Territorially Focused Development Plans) were being implemented. Lockdown measures and travel restrictions introduced to combat COVID-19 increased the risk to HRDs from illegal armed groups, since they were more easily targeted, and often killed, near their homes. Community and indigenous leaders were most affected. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) confirmed that at least 133 HRDs had been killed in 2020^[footnote 78], an increase from 108 in 2019.

The Colombian Government reiterated its commitment to protecting HRDs, and there were some improvements in the situation. The Attorney General's Office increased convictions of perpetrators, including of those ordering the killings. The UK contributed to the protection of Colombian HRDs in many ways. For example, we supported the special unit at the Attorney General's Office in charge of investigating

attacks against HRDs; helped boost the capacity of the Ombudsman's Office early warning system to act against threats; contributed to the funding of a study to identify patterns and causes of attacks against HRDs; and supported the system set up to establish protection mechanisms. In 2021, the UK will support a new joint programme, funded through the UN Trust Fund, working across the Colombian Government to establish safe spaces for social leaders and former FARC fighters.

The full implementation of the Peace Agreement continued to be crucial to improve the security situation for former FARC combatants, 248 of whom were killed from 2016 to 2020^[footnote 79], with 73 of these killings taking place in 2020. The Government expressed its solidarity, and committed to protecting them and their families, but not enough was done to provide security in conflict-affected areas.

Colombia's lengthy lockdown because of COVID-19 allowed illegal armed groups to expand and exert more control over certain communities. As well as threats and killings, armed groups carried out forced displacements and vehicle incinerations as punishment for not abiding by their movement restrictions. In addition, they blocked land and waterways, and disrupted the arrival of food and medical supplies. Although the national lockdown was lifted on 1 September, armed groups continued their own lockdowns in some regions.

Criminal groups settling scores or vying for control of territory led to the killing of at least 292 people^[footnote 80], with perpetrators ranging from narco-trafficking organisations to armed groups and dissidents who rejected the peace process. The Colombian Defence Ministry created a Special Unit to identify, locate and prosecute the perpetrators.

Colombia fell one place in the Reporters without Borders Media Freedom Index, ranking 130 out of 180 countries^[footnote 81]. Violence and fear leading to self-censorship were the most common threats. The UK continued to defend media freedom through supporting projects to strengthen and facilitate the creation of local media outlets in municipalities lacking them.

The Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI) remained one of the UK's top priorities. We engaged in high-level conversations to address sexual violence in conflict, and funded a project to produce informative and educational pieces to tackle sexual and gender-based violence and mental health in indigenous communities.

Violent protests broke out in September after a video went viral on social media, showing Bogotá police repeatedly shocking a man with a taser during an arrest; he later died in hospital. 13 protesters died in the demonstrations that followed, and over 400 people were injured, including over 100 police officers. There were reports of some police firing indiscriminately into crowds gathered outside police stations, a number of which were burned down during the protests. The Government condemned the excessive use of force by some police, suspended the officers involved, and launched an investigation. The UK welcomed this investigation and affirmed its support for Colombians' right to protest peacefully.

In addition to its programme activities, the UK continued to raise concerns about human rights both directly with the Government and in multilateral fora such as the UN Security Council. In October, Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, the Minister responsible for human rights, held a virtual visit to Colombia. He met HRDs, survivors of sexual violence, journalists, and a range of government officials including the Deputy Attorney General, Martha Mancera, to discuss how the UK could provide further support. In 2021, we plan to build on these suggestions and seek to provide targeted UK expertise and assistance where it can make the most impact.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea

There was no improvement in the human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 2020. Human rights violations remained widespread and systematic, and the perpetrators unaccountable. On paper, freedom of speech, religion or belief, the press, association, and demonstration were guaranteed by the North Korean Constitution. In reality, North Koreans enjoyed none of these freedoms. The DPRK remained top of Open Doors' annual ranking of the 50 countries where Christians experience extreme persecution^[footnote 82], and came bottom in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index^[footnote 83].

The DPRK authorities continued to deny allegations of human rights violations. They continued to refuse to cooperate with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) 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 concluded that the wide-ranging and continuing human rights violations taking place in the DPRK may amount to "crimes against humanity". Restrictions on internal movement introduced in response to COVID-19 at the beginning of 2020, including for members of UN agencies and NGOs, severely affected the distribution of aid and support throughout the year. The DPRK authorities also introduced a wider lockdown of entry into the country in response to the pandemic.

The UK continued to raise and challenge the DPRK's human rights record in multilateral fora. We co-sponsored resolutions on the human rights situation in the DPRK adopted by the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) and UN General Assembly Third Committee, in March and November respectively. Both resolutions recalled the DPRK's responsibility to protect its population from human rights violations, 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 November, we reminded the DPRK that measures used to contain COVID-19 should be proportionate, and should not be used unnecessarily further to restrict the freedom of citizens. In December, the UN Security Council discussed human rights violations in the DPRK as a threat to international peace and security.

Reports by the UN Special Rapporteur to the HRC in May, and by the OHCHR in July, added to the growing body of information regarding human rights violations in places of detention. Women, including those who had escaped the DPRK and subsequently been repatriated, faced gender-based human rights violations, notably an increased risk of sexual violence.

The UK continued to use its bilateral relationship to engage with the DPRK Government on its human rights record. F.C.D.O. officials used meetings in London with DPRK embassy officials to raise human rights concerns. Officials encouraged incremental change where they saw opportunities. In May, the UK temporarily closed its Embassy in Pyongyang as restrictions on entry to the DPRK made it impossible to sustain its operation. Nonetheless, the UK Ambassador to the DPRK Colin Crooks continued to engage with DPRK officials and UN human rights actors on human rights issues.

In July, the UK imposed sanctions on two DPRK entities under the Global Human Rights sanctions regime. The Ministry of State Security Bureau 7 was designated as a DPRK Government body with responsibility for running political prison camps, estimated to hold 80,000-120,000, with involvement in the murder, torture and forced labour of those incarcerated. The Ministry of People's Security Correctional Bureau was designated as a DPRK Government body with responsibility for running prison camps for 'ordinary' prisoners, with involvement in the serious human rights violations committed in those camps, estimated to hold over 70,000. Both entities are now subject to an asset freeze and a travel ban.

In October, the Korea Future Initiative released a report entitled 'Persecuting Faith: Documenting religious freedom violations in North Korea'. The report assessed the status of freedom of religion or belief in DPRK, and contained disturbing accounts of human rights violations against those who have attempted to practise their religion or belief.

In 2021, the UK will continue to raise the human rights situation in the DPRK and use multilateral fora to urge the regime to cooperate fully with relevant UN human rights mandate holders, and allow them immediate and unhindered access to the country. When conditions allow, we shall seek to return our Embassy staff to Pyongyang, and explore new opportunities for greater engagement between the international community and the DPRK authorities on human rights.

Democratic Republic of Congo

The human rights situation in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) deteriorated, reversing progress made in 2019. The UN Joint Human Rights Office (UNJHRO) documented 7,909 violations and abuses, a 21% increase from 2019, and more than the 6,814 recorded in the 2018 election year^[footnote 84]. Human rights violations and abuses included sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), restrictions on freedom of expression, arbitrary arrests and detentions, and extrajudicial killings. UNJHRO reported that armed groups overtook state agents as the main perpetrators, committing 55% of documented violations and abuses^[footnote 85].

Nearly 93% of documented violations and abuses took place in conflict-affected provinces; and armed groups continued to attack civilians indiscriminately^[footnote 86]. The UK supported efforts to build stability and reduce violence in DRC through diplomatic efforts and funding. In financial year 2020/21, we contributed £52 million in funding and three staff officers to the UN Organisation Stabilization Mission in DRC (MONUSCO). We also ensured that protection of civilians remained central to the mission's 2020 mandate renewal, alongside a renewed focus on stabilisation and strengthening state institutions. Through our £70 million UKAid programme (2014-21), we continued to fund UNJHRO activities and to contribute to the DRC Stabilisation Coherence Fund, which supported local-level mediation initiatives and recovery in communities affected by violence. The programme also worked to challenge impunity of security actors, through mobile courts, support to prosecution cells, and sensitisation campaigns.

SGBV perpetrated by state agents and armed groups continued, with at least 967 adult victims. The UK welcomed the conviction in November of former militia leader Ntabo Ntaberi Sheka, who was sentenced to life imprisonment for crimes including mass rape, recruitment of child soldiers and sexual slavery^[footnote 87]. The UK funded the NGO TRIAL International to secure greater accountability for SGBV cases and build local capacity to document, investigate and litigate effectively. TRIAL supported the successful prosecution of two militiamen, ensuring justice for 150 victims of sexual violence. The UK provided funding to the PANZI Foundation, which enabled the NGO to deliver legal assistance to 24 victims of SGBV and close 146 cases through conflict resolution, arbitration and acts of conciliation. Education and health programmes funded by the UK supported schools in responding to SGBV incidents, and provided post-exposure prophylaxis kits to survivors of sexual violence. The UK also trained 145 teachers, social workers and points of contact in schools on child protection and preventing SGBV.

In October, the British Embassy in Kinshasa helped fund an event with local peacebuilders and women leaders, marking 20 years of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. At this event we encouraged international partners to sign up to the UK-funded International Civil Society Action Network's Protection Framework for women peacebuilders, and to endorse the UK-supported Declaration of Humanity, denouncing the stigmatisation of survivors of sexual violence. In December, the British Ambassador to DRC, Emily Maltman, hosted senior DRC Government officials, ambassadors and development partners to showcase 'Binti', a UK-sponsored documentary on gender-based violence.

Previous gains made on civil and political rights were reversed, with increased political tension accompanied by a reported reduction in democratic space and media freedom. Human Rights Watch reported government harassment of critics, journalists and protesters, suspension of broadcasting, and closure of radio stations^[footnote 88]. The UNJHRO noted violations concerning the exercise of public freedoms and political rights through arbitrary arrests, illegal detentions, and the banning of at least 29 demonstrations by local authorities under the pretext of COVID-19 measures. UNJHRO reported numerous violations of the right to liberty and security by state agents, including extrajudicial killings in relation to crowd control, harsh punishment of non-compliance with COVID-19 measures, and the suppressing of protests. The UK worked with international partners to pressure the Government to protect political space and recognise individuals' right to protest peacefully. In October, we expressed our concern about the situation via Human Rights Council resolution A/HRC/RES/45/34.

Modern slavery remained a challenging issue, particularly in artisanal mining. The British Embassy together with the NGO Pact UK hosted a series of workshops and training sessions focussed on tackling modern slavery in mineral supply chains. More broadly, the UK maintained pressure on the Government to adhere to the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights Initiative, and supported programmes bringing together civil society and the private sector to improve human rights compliance and Government oversight of security provision in the mining sector. The Government has since committed to developing a plan to become a full member of the Initiative.

In 2021, the UK will continue to urge the Government of DRC to improve the human rights situation by ensuring respect for political and civil liberties, reforming the security sector, and tackling impunity. The UK will also sustain its support for efforts to build peace and stability in DRC.

Egypt

Areas of concern in Egypt included the erosion of space for civil society; restrictions on freedom of expression, including media and digital freedom; the application of terrorism legislation against peaceful critics; and a sharp rise in the number of executions. However, there was some progress on freedom of religion or belief, and on gender equality.

Restrictions on independent civil society tightened further. A large number of human rights defenders (HRDs) spent the year in pre-trial detention, many on terrorism charges. In several instances, new charges were introduced, allowing the authorities to circumvent the legal limit on pre-trial detention. Several HRDs were arrested, as well as a gender researcher working with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), Patrick Zaki, who remained in prison at the end of the year. In November, three EIPR staff members were detained on terrorism charges, shortly after meeting senior foreign diplomats in Cairo. The Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, was the first foreign minister to raise the case with the Egyptian authorities. The three EIPR staff members were released three weeks later, but the investigation remained open. In August, the founder of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, Bahey el-Din Hassan, was sentenced in absentia to 15 years in prison. The UK International Human Rights Ambassador, Rita French, issued a statement following the sentencing^[footnote 89]. On 10 December, Italian prosecutors investigating the 2016 murder of Giulio Regeni presented charges against four members of the Egyptian security forces. The Egyptian authorities have closed their own investigation into the case.

Freedom of expression, including media freedom, was eroded further. Several journalists and medical workers who criticised the Government's response to COVID-19 were arrested, and in March the Cairo correspondent of The Guardian newspaper was expelled after writing that COVID-19 cases were being underreported. Over 500 websites remained blocked in Egypt at the end of the year. Egypt ranked 166 out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index^[footnote 90], and according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, it had the third highest

number of journalists in prison globally^[footnote 91]. As co-chair of the Media Freedom Coalition Executive Group, the UK released a statement in November expressing concern at the arrest and intimidation of individuals associated with the independent news website Darb^[footnote 92].

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened longstanding UK concerns about prison conditions, including reports of overcrowding, unsanitary conditions and inadequate medical care. In January, a dual Egyptian-US citizen died in detention following a hunger strike. In July, journalist Mohamed Mounir died days after his release from prison. Later that month, Human Rights Watch documented several COVID-19 cases in prisons. Such reports were difficult to verify because of restrictions on prison access. Activists who campaigned for the release of prisoners during the outbreak were also arrested, including Sanaa Seif in June. According to the UNHCR, over 3,000 migrants and refugees were detained during the year. The UK regularly raised specific cases with the Egyptian authorities, and continued to follow up on the implementation of its recommendations at the 2019 Universal Periodic Review in Geneva.

There was a sharp increase in the number of executions. Although difficult to verify, Egyptian lawyers documented at least 53 executions in October, bringing the total number for the year to more than 100. In November, the UK raised its concern at the widening application of the death penalty with the Egyptian National Council for Human Rights.

There were some improvements with regard to freedom of religion or belief. In January, the Prime Minister's then Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Rehman Chishti, welcomed the inauguration of the Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue—Alexandria's oldest—following a three-year restoration. In 2020, the number of licenses issued under the 2016 Church Building Law increased, with over 1,800 more church buildings receiving licenses. However, the continuing detention of Coptic rights activist Ramy Kamel remained a cause for concern.

There was some progress on gender equality, including better access to girls' education. A movement to hold perpetrators of sexual violence to account resulted in a number of arrests, as well as a new law to protect victims' anonymity. However, the subsequent arrest of several witnesses undermined progress. Several young female TikTok influencers were also fined and sentenced to prison terms for 'violating family values'.

Egyptian lawyers reported that LGBT+ people remained subject to arrest on charges of 'debauchery' or 'inciting debauchery', sometimes following the use of social media traps by the authorities. Forced anal examinations were also reported. In January, after interviewing an LGBT+ individual, TV host Mohamed Al-Ghaity was sentenced to a year in prison for contempt of religion, incitement of debauchery, and immorality. However, comments by the Education Minister Dr Tarek Shawki in November urging society to do more to accept transgender people were welcome.

We shall continue to encourage progress on human rights in Egypt in 2021, with a particular focus on freedom of expression, prison conditions, and justice. Egypt's newly established Supreme Committee for Human Rights and the commitment to drafting a National Human Rights Strategy may offer new avenues for cooperation.

Eritrea

There was no improvement in the overall human rights situation in Eritrea, apart from the release of a number of Christian and Muslim believers. Arbitrary detention, violations of freedom of expression and of freedom of religion or belief, and the indefinite nature of the national service system continued to be our main concerns. In some regards, the situation deteriorated. From November there were persistent and credible reports, including by the independent Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, that Eritrean troops were involved in the fighting in the Tigray region of neighbouring Ethiopia, with allegations of possible violations of international law, including international human rights law.

Following the February 2019 Universal Periodic Review, the UK welcomed Eritrea's continued engagement in the process, including its continued development in 2020 of a four-year 'framework for action'. In October, at the Interactive Dialogue with the UN Special Rapporteur for the Human Rights Situation in Eritrea, Ms Daniela Kravetz, the UK offered support with the implementation of the framework, and urged Eritrea to release those still subject to arbitrary detention, and to advance national service reform. The UK continued to support the mandate of the Special Rapporteur and welcomed the appointment of Dr Mohamed Babiker to the role at the end of the year. We remained disappointed with the Government's continued refusal to cooperate with the Special Rapporteur or to allow any rapporteur to visit Eritrea.

Eritrea continued to operate a system of universal and compulsory national service, spanning both military and civilian roles, beginning in the last year of schooling, and with few being exempt. For many, service continued to be open-ended; and many Eritreans continued to decide to avoid it by leaving the country to avoid national service. The justification for such service remained the frozen conflict with Ethiopia, despite the July 2018 peace agreement. During 2020 there was little sign of reform.

From November, there was a growing weight of credible evidence of the involvement of Eritrean forces in hostilities throughout the Tigray region of Ethiopia, including allegations of refoulement from refugee camps in northern Tigray to Eritrea. We raised our concerns with Ministers in both governments, making clear the overriding need to protect civilians and adhere to international law and international human rights law. We also called for independent, international investigations of alleged atrocities.

There continued to be consistent reports that high profile political figures remained in detention, with no access to justice. Some were detained for 20 years following criticism of the Government of Eritrea. The Government did not allow access to places of detention of political figures, and shared no information on detainees. Eritrea had no constitutional government or national elections.

Activity by adherents of religions other than those permitted by the Government of Eritrea (Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, Lutheran Christianity, and Sunni Islam), continued to be suppressed and many remained in detention. However, the Government released 22 Methodist, 98 Muslim, and 27 Pentecostal worshippers, and 28 Jehovah's Witnesses. Some had been in detention, without trial, for over 20 years. Despite these releases, arrests continued of worshippers of unregulated religions^[footnote 93]. Our Ambassador in Asmara, Alisdair Walker, continued to raise the detention of worshippers with the authorities.

Eritrea was ranked 178 out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index^[footnote 94], with all internal media operated by the state. 16 journalists, arbitrarily detained without fair trial during the 2000s, remained incarcerated. In April, Eritrea's limited internet availability was further reduced when internet cafes were closed because of COVID-19. No attempt was made to block access to foreign satellite broadcasters, allowing broadcasts by opposition groups to be viewed within Eritrea.

The Eritrean authorities introduced restrictive measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. There were reports^[footnote 95] in August that border closures and the confiscation of fishing boats were leading to food shortages in the coastal Danakali region, particularly affecting the Afar community. Both our Ambassador in Asmara and the now FCO Minister for Africa, James Duddridge, raised our concerns with the Government, which acknowledged the restrictions but denied that the measures were aimed at any particular community. The Minister for Africa acknowledged the importance of taking measures to tackle COVID-19, but said that measures should be proportionate.

Eritrea has continued to make progress against some of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Government addressed maternal health and sexual reproductive health in support of women and girls, with the focus on ensuring access to maternal and neonatal health services, building capacity to create demand for, and to ensure the availability of, modern contraceptives, and raising awareness in the community to eliminate all forms of harmful traditional practices. Eritrea's vaccination programme was uninterrupted, with the Ministry of Health providing nearly 1.5 million shot/drops, exceeding 2019 by nearly 175,000 vaccinations.

In 2021, we shall continue to raise freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief, the use of arbitrary detention and national service reform with the Government. We shall call for the withdrawal of Eritrean troops from the Tigray region of Ethiopia until it takes place. We shall also call for an independent international investigation into alleged human rights violations and abuses committed by all sides during the Tigray conflict.

Iran

Iran continued to violate human rights. Protests were suppressed, mass arrests occurred and many detainees faced limited access to justice and little due process, particularly dual nationals. The use of the death penalty was widespread, and trials were marred by irregularities. Violations of the rights to freedom of expression, and to freedom of religion or belief, continued and women remained unable to participate fully in society.

It remained difficult to monitor accurately how many executions were carried out in Iran, as not all were made public. Credible estimates suggested that at least 233 people were executed, meaning Iran ranked as one of the most prolific users of the death penalty globally. This figure included one person executed for drinking alcohol, and five known juvenile offenders who were under 18 years of age at the time of their reported crimes. These executions violated Iran's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), while the latter also violated Iran's obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The UK repeatedly stated its opposition to Iran's use of the death penalty.

In response to COVID-19, Iran granted thousands of prisoners furlough or pardons to help ease overcrowding. Some political detainees with sentences of fewer than five years were released early. However, many others were denied furlough, or were brought back to prison early when the pandemic was still rife, and conditions within prisons remained extremely poor.

There were restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly. The authorities initiated localised shutdowns of the internet—particularly in January and July^[footnote 96]—and arrested participants in demonstrations. Foreign-based media continued to receive threats to their staff, particularly women, and to their relatives in Iran. One newspaper, Jahane Sanat, was permanently shut down in August after critically reporting on Iran's response to COVID-19. At least 19 journalists, writers and social media users were arrested, with a sudden increase in detentions during November and December. Several major social media websites, including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, remained banned.

The Iranian authorities continued to violate the right to freedom of religion or belief. Members of religious minorities faced restrictions for peacefully practising their beliefs. Baha'is were denied access to mainstream education and national identification cards, while the number of mass arrests and home raids increased. In November, the parliament passed amendments to the Penal Code, covering anyone who 'insulted' legally recognised religions. Several NGOs feared that, if approved, this could mean further targeting of those following their religion^[footnote 97].

While Christians notionally benefitted from constitutional recognition and protection, they continued to be persecuted, especially converts. At least two individuals were flogged in 2020 for drinking communion wine^[footnote 98], and four others were given a total of 35 years in prison for forming a house-church, despite Iran's international obligation under the ICCPR to recognise an individual's freedom to choose and practise their religion. At the UN Human Rights Council on 25 September, the UK co-signed a joint statement with 46 other states which set out our deep concern about such persistent human rights violations in Iran, and called for perpetrators to be held accountable.

Three high-profile honour killings against women and girls occurred between May and June, which drew significant global attention to this previously underreported issue. In response, Iran passed a child protection law on 7 June that had stalled for more than a decade. Despite this welcome change, at least one expert—lawyer and child rights activist Monica Nadi—suggested that the law did not offer comprehensive and complete protection for children^[footnote 99]. Meanwhile, women in Iran continued to be denied the same rights and privileges as men, and faced unequal rights in marriage, divorce and child custody. Women human rights defenders and activists were given severe jail terms. Saba Kordafshari's sentence was increased to 24 years in prison, for her role in the anti-mandatory hijab campaign, while Nasrin Sotoudeh was ordered to return to Qarchak prison, despite concerns about her deteriorating health.

Iran continued to deny consular access to dual British nationals in detention. The Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, repeatedly raised with the Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, the cases of a number of British-Iranians detainees. On 22 September, the FCO summoned the Iranian Ambassador, Hamid Baedinejad, and presented a letter from the British, French and German Foreign Ministers, expressing their concern about the human rights situation and the arbitrary detention of dual nationals.

In 2021, we shall keep raising our dual national detainee cases with Iran and take all appropriate action to secure their release. We shall continue to hold Iran to account on a wide range of human rights issues, by using our membership of the UN Human Rights Council and elsewhere at the UN, through frequent contact with the Iranian Government, and by working with our European partners.

Iraq

In the face of numerous challenges, including an economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, the human rights situation in Iraq did not improve. There was no meaningful accountability for large-scale loss of life and casualties of peaceful protesters during demonstrations in early 2020. COVID-19 exacerbated long-standing socio-economic inequality and gender disparities.

Civil society space and freedom of expression continued to be constricted. Civil society, and political and human rights activists, faced threats and violence. In June, journalist and security expert Dr Hisham Al-Hashemi was fatally shot in front of his house, following months of repeated threats from armed groups. Female human rights activists were a particular target, following their increased involvement in the protest movement. In October, UN Human Rights experts issued a statement calling for Iraq to investigate the killing and attempted killing of two female human rights defenders^[footnote 100]. Iraqi human rights organisations recorded at least 44 kidnappings, 74 attempted assassinations, and documented at least 39 killings of activists following the outbreak of mass anti-government protests in late 2019. Many activists were forced to flee Iraq for their own safety.

At the start of the year, popular protests in Baghdad and southern Iraq, calling for reforms and the resignation of the Government, were harshly suppressed by elements of the Iraqi Security Forces and militia groups. Smaller, localised protests continued throughout 2020, resulting in casualties and loss of life. The Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights and Amnesty International estimated that at least 600 protesters and members of the security forces had been killed over the course of the protests, with more than 18,000 injured. Prime Minister

Mustafa al-Kadhimi committed to compensating the families of the victims, and promised investigations into the violence. But by the end of the year there had been no credible prosecutions. In discussions with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Chief Justice, and in the United Nations Security Council, the UK repeatedly condemned the excessive use of force by the security forces, and called for those responsible to be held to account.

The space for independent journalism remained limited. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, media outlets were closed without a legitimate legal basis, and journalists faced harassment and intimidation by government forces.

Towards the end of 2020, the Government of Iraq accelerated its plans to close all camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), raising serious concerns about whether returns were safe and voluntary. After mid-October, 16 IDP camps and informal sites in Federal Iraq were closed or reclassified, affecting 34,675 people. Reporting from the International Organization for Migration indicated that a significant number of IDPs in camps were unable to return to their areas of origin because of a lack of adequate shelter or livelihood opportunities, and faced significant barriers to returning, without access to the right documentation or security clearances. The UK continued to lobby the Government, and worked closely with the UN, to seek safe and sustainable solutions for IDPs.

Between 2014 and 2020, the UK committed £272 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. Humanitarian support provided in 2020 focused on ensuring that Iraq could manage the COVID-19 pandemic while continuing to meet the needs of the most vulnerable.

The societal effects of Daesh atrocities, in particular the stigma experienced by survivors and children born of sexual violence, and those with perceived Daesh affiliation, remained unresolved. There was some progress on legislation to provide rehabilitation services and reparations for survivors of Daesh.

The UK provided a further £1 million for the UN Investigative Team for the Accountability of Daesh (UNITAD) in 2020. We supported investigations into violence against minority communities, and the development of Shuhud, a digital platform allowing witnesses and survivors to submit information remotely, securely and confidentially in relation to Daesh crimes.

Although Iraq's Constitution requires 25% of MPs to be female, women continued to be marginalised in political participation. Iraq's cabinet had only one female Minister: the Minister for Construction and Housing, Nazineen Mohammed Wassaw Sheikh Mohammad. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the Parliamentary Speaker, Dr Rewas Fayaq, was female and there were three female Ministers in the Kurdistan Regional Government. The UK and partners lobbied for greater political representation by women. 'Honour' killings against women, girls and LGBT+ people continued. Domestic violence remained a major danger facing women and girls in Iraq. Since the onset of COVID-19, Iraqi Community Police reported a 20% increase in incidents of domestic violence. There was no progress on passing a draft bill to criminalise domestic violence in Federal Iraq, which had stalled in parliament since 2014.

Through the COVID-19 Enabling Fund, the UK supported projects to raise awareness of gender-based violence and provide health services for female IDPs in the South of Iraq. The Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) supported radio-based and community outreach initiatives to raise awareness of domestic violence in local communities.

The UK continued to be the largest donor to the UN's Iraq Humanitarian Fund. Between 2014 and 2020, the Fund assisted 7.5 million women and 8.7 million girls. In 2020/21, the UK provided £2 million to the UNDP COVID-19 response in Iraq.

Widespread use of the death penalty against Daesh suspects continued, with reports of ill-treatment and torture during arrest and pre-trial detention. The UK continued to lobby against the death penalty, for better conditions in prisons, and for due process and transparency in investigations and trials.

In 2021, the UK will continue to speak out against human rights violations and abuses, and support the Government of Iraq to safeguard the human rights of all Iraqis.

The State of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

The Government of Israel continued to violate 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). The Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas, the de facto administration in Gaza, continued to commit human rights abuses.

Protests and escalations of violence between Israel and Palestinian armed groups in Gaza continued. According to the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), a unit within the Israeli Ministry of Defence, 277 rockets and other projectiles were launched into Israeli territory in 2020. In total, three Israeli civilians were injured. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), five Palestinian civilians were killed, including four by live ammunition fired by Israeli forces.

The overall humanitarian crisis in Gaza was exacerbated by COVID-19. The main civilian crossing into Israel was largely closed for all but humanitarian cases. The UK continued to fund projects to help address Israeli restrictions on movement and access to and from Gaza.

Israel continued its systematic policy of illegal settlement expansion in the OPTs, a breach of international humanitarian law which the UK continued to oppose. Israel advanced over 9,000 housing units in the West Bank (OPTs). Several plans were taken forward in sensitive areas in and around Jerusalem, including 'E1' and Givat HaMatos, which threatened the viability of a two-state solution.

Israel demolished Palestinian structures at an increasing rate, leaving those displaced more vulnerable to COVID-19. According to OCHA, 854 structures were demolished^{[\[footnote 101\]](#)} or seized across the West Bank and 1,001 Palestinians were displaced as a result, the highest figures since 2016. OCHA estimated an additional 970 Palestinians were at risk of eviction from their homes in East Jerusalem. The UK continued to make clear its opposition to demolitions and evictions, and to fund legal aid for Palestinians contesting related cases.

OCHA reported that 24 Palestinians had been killed by Israeli forces in the West Bank. The Israeli Security Agency (ISA) reported that two Israeli civilians and one Israeli soldier had been killed by Palestinians. According to OCHA, the number of acts of violence and vandalism perpetrated by settlers against Palestinians increased for the fourth year running. ISA recorded 1,248 violent attacks by Palestinians in the West Bank. In May, the killing by Israeli Border Police of unarmed, disabled Palestinian Iyad Hallaq in Jerusalem's Old City drew wide condemnation. Israeli prosecutors notified the police officer involved of their intention to indict on charges of 'reckless homicide'. The UK continued to call for investigations into, and accountability for, excessive use of force in the OPTs.

The number of Palestinian minors in Israeli detention decreased, with 131 detained at the end of December 2020. The UK continued to seek improvements in their treatment, including access to legal representation, notification of their legal rights, and an end to physical violence. According to the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, most Palestinian prisoners continued to be held in Israel, despite international law providing that protected persons be detained in the OPTs.

In the West Bank (OPTs), monitoring groups reported allegations of ill-treatment and torture by PA Security Forces. The PA also continued to restrict space for civil society and freedom of expression. The UK continued to urge the PA leadership to respect human rights, properly investigate complaints of ill-treatment, and improve the security sector's compliance with international human rights standards. We also called for the establishment of a National Preventive Mechanism Against Torture.

In Gaza, Hamas continued to exercise strict control over civil society and to carry out arbitrary summons and arrests of journalists and political activists. In October, a Gaza Military Court convicted peace activist Rami Aman and two colleagues of 'weakening the revolutionary spirit' in relation to their participation in a Zoom call with Israeli youth in April.

Hamas issued 17 death sentences in 2020. While the UK maintained a no-contact policy with Hamas, we continued to make clear our objections to its use of the death penalty, for example in parliament. Its military wing remains proscribed organisation.

Despite continued verbal commitments from the PA, there was limited progress on women's rights. COVID-19 lockdowns led to sharp increases in reports of domestic violence. 14 women were killed as a result of gender-based violence. The Family Protection Bill, which would increase the protection of women's rights in law, was not ratified. However, the PA did continue to improve diversity in public institutions, such as opening a new UK-funded female training facility at the Palestinian Security Forces Central Training Institute in Jericho, providing accommodation and training for female officers.

Israel remained an open democracy, underpinned by robust institutions and a vibrant civil society. However, the space for those criticising Israel's conduct in the OPTs continued to come under strain. In February, Israel suspended its ties with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), following a disagreement over the release of a database highlighting companies working in Israeli settlements. In June, Israel refused to renew visas to employees of the OHCHR, raising concerns over the organisation's ability to monitor human rights issues.

In 2021, the UK will continue to engage with the Palestinian Authority and Government of Israel on human rights issues in the context of the occupation. We shall continue to oppose actions that constitute violations and abuses of international human rights law and international humanitarian law by the Government of Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, and to support the work of civil society actors, including through our programmes.

Libya

From January to June, the human rights situation in Libya deteriorated further because of an escalation in the armed conflict, as the Government of National Accord (GNA) reversed the gains made by the Libyan National Army (LNA). The situation stabilised from June, along a new front line in the Sirte area. Reported human rights violations and abuses continued throughout the year, often linked to the conflict. These included indiscriminate attacks on, and unlawful killings of, civilians and refugees, discrimination against women and girls, and restrictions on freedom of expression, and freedom of religion or belief. The UK continued to support the UN-led efforts to secure a sustainable peace.

Both sides of the armed conflict committed acts that violated international humanitarian law. In the first half of the year, the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) reported 489 civilian casualties^[footnote 102]. Ground fighting, explosive remnants of war and airstrikes were the leading cause of these casualties, as a result of both GNA and LNA operations. Medical facilities and schools were also struck by explosive ordnance^[footnote 103], mass graves were discovered in Tarhouna and southern Tripoli in June, with many more discovered thereafter, reportedly linked to abductions and killings allegedly committed by the 7th/9th Brigade (also known as the al-Kaniyat militia)^[footnote 104].

The UK consistently emphasised the need for all parties to respect international humanitarian law, condemned human rights violations and abuses, and raised the importance of accountability. In June, the UK co-sponsored the UN Human Rights Council resolution establishing a Fact-Finding Mission to investigate violations and abuses in Libya—a much-needed step towards accountability^[footnote 105]. In September, at the UN Security Council, the UK ensured that action to counter sexual and gender-based violence was included in UNSMIL's mandate renewal. In particular, the UNSC agreed to new obligations that UNSMIL, "monitor and report... [on] sexual violence in conflict, notably through the effective deployment of women and child protection advisers"^[footnote 106].

The security and justice sector remained dysfunctional. Human rights violations included arbitrary detention without charge or legal representation, forced labour, and ill-treatment in overcrowded cells^[footnote 107]. At an operational level, the UK continued with a five-year project (2018-22) to develop a human rights-compliant detention pathway from arrest to imprisonment, working closely with the Libyan Government and NGO partners. Libyan law continued to provide for the death penalty, but no executions were carried out during 2020.

Libya remained a transit and destination country for migrants and refugees. As of October, IOM reported a total of 574,146 migrants in Libya^[footnote 108]. According to the UN, many migrants and refugees continued to be held in unofficial facilities in degrading living conditions. As of 19 January 2021, UNHCR reported 928 migrants, asylum seekers or refugees in official detention centres, compared with approximately 4,200 in 2019. Human rights organisations continued to document evidence of the widespread use of violence by militias against refugees and migrants, including torture, physical violence, sexual violence, forced labour, deprivation of food and water and the murder of detainees. For example, in May, 26 Bangladeshi nationals and four individuals from sub-Saharan Africa were massacred in Mizdah while the town was under the control of an armed group affiliated to the LNA. The fate of 120 to 150 migrant detainees remained unknown. The UK called on the GNA, which controlled Mizdah, to stop the arbitrary detention of migrants and asylum seekers within Libya, and to investigate the killings of detainees in Mizdah. UK-funded humanitarian assistance provided psychosocial support and access to healthcare, other basic services and legal assistance for migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers.

The continuing conflict, and absence of security, rule of law and basic services, had a disproportionate impact on women and girls, further exacerbated by COVID-19. Women remained under-represented in all governance institutions and processes, making up fewer than 20% of politicians in Libya. UK-funded programmes trained women peacebuilders, supported female entrepreneurs, and provided protection for vulnerable women and girls, including through psychosocial support. HRH The Countess of Wessex's virtual visit to Libya in October highlighted the valuable contribution which women made to peace and security in Libya, despite the many challenges they faced. The UK worked with UNSMIL and UN Women to ensure that women played a role in the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) negotiations. The LPDF subsequently agreed that at least 30% of senior positions in the interim unified executive authority must be held by women.

Widespread restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, association, assembly, and religion or belief, and restrictions on media freedom continued. Indiscriminate attacks and the silencing of journalists, activists and human rights defenders continued to take place. The UK condemned the deplorable killing of lawyer Hanan Al-Barassi on 10 November in Benghazi, and called for a full, immediate and transparent investigation in cooperation with the UN Fact Finding Mission in Libya. UK-funded programmes supported civil society and the promotion of impartial and accurate online media content, including respect for freedom of expression and tolerance of diversity.

Through diplomatic engagement and programmes in 2021, the UK will continue to support Libyan civil society, including women, youth and vulnerable groups, and to promote human rights and greater protection of civic space for activists and human rights defenders. We shall also work to boost Libyan capacity to counter serious organised crime and organised immigration crime. The UK will continue to urge the Libyan Government to cooperate with the ICC Prosecutor in its ongoing investigations in Libya, address the persistent climate of impunity in Libya, and to prioritise protecting human rights for all its citizens.

Mali

The human rights situation in Mali deteriorated, with increasing allegations of violations committed by Malian defence and security forces, and continued attacks against civilians, as extremist violence and inter-community conflict escalated. Steps to advance the rights of women were limited, and children continued to be disproportionately affected by the continuing conflict.



UK troops out on patrol, supporting the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Mali to better understand and respond to threats.

In August, a coup d'état led to the detention of several political and military figures, including the former President, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, and Prime Minister, Boubou Cissé. During pre-coup demonstrations in July, security forces were reported to have killed 14 protesters, including two children. After a transitional Government was established, the UK worked with international partners to coordinate messaging around the need to deliver credible elections within the agreed timeframe, and to address underlying grievances, including impunity for human rights violations and abuses.

Violent extremist organisations continued to extend their influence in Mali, particularly where state presence was limited, and to carry out attacks deliberately targeting civilians. In October, for example, militants not aligned to established groups besieged Farabougou village in central Mali, killing civilians and leaving up to 4,000 inhabitants isolated with limited access to food. The UK increased its contribution to the protection of civilians in Mali. In December, we deployed 300 troops to the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and the UK was one of the largest humanitarian donors to Mali, providing over £14 million to the most vulnerable during 2020.



Lt Gen Gyllensporre, MINUSMA Force Commander, welcomes UK troops as part of the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Mali, December 2020. The UK deployed 300 troops who will be supporting UN efforts to protect civilians and build sustainable peace in Mali.

As the tempo of counter-terrorism operations increased, so too did the number of alleged violations committed by state security and defence forces. In its report on the human rights situation in Mali, covering July to September 2020, MINUSMA documented an increase of over 40% in the number of violations committed by Malian defence and security forces compared with the previous three-month period. While MINUSMA's October to December 2020 report showed a significant decrease in the number of violations, investigations into allegations and judicial processes remained limited. The UK condemned the reported violations at the UN Security Council, raised our concerns in-country, and called for renewed efforts by the authorities to tackle impunity. In December, we handed over the UK-designed curriculum and guidance on international humanitarian law training, delivered via the EU Training Mission in Mali, to Swedish trainers. Between May 2019 and December 2020, UK trainers delivered human security training to 1,408 Malian armed forces personnel.

Limited progress was made to improve women's rights. Mali ranked 139 out of 153 countries in the 2020 Global Gender Gap Index^[footnote 109]. Women and girls continued to be subject to discriminatory social views, practices and intimidation, restricting their rights to health, and education, and their ability to participate in society. In a number of regions across Mali, the UK supported access to high-quality family planning services, and worked to ensure that marginalised women, men and adolescents had access to knowledge and community support to make informed sexual and reproductive health decisions.

While some steps were taken to increase women's inclusion in the country's decision-making processes, these were limited. Following the establishment of the transitional Government, women representatives from each of the signatory parties participated for the first time in the monitoring committee for Mali's Peace Agreement. However, participation of women in the Government remained below the minimum 30% quota required by law. At the end of the year, efforts to approve a draft law prohibiting gender-based violence and strengthening gender equality were proposed for the second time, but the law had yet to be approved by the end of the year. The UK lobbied the Government on the protection of women's rights and the need for increased inclusivity, including in the UN, where we pushed for strong benchmarks on the participation of women in the decision-making structures of the Mali peace process and in broader political life.

The UN reported that, from 2017 to 2020, there was an almost two-fold increase in the recruitment and use of children by violent extremist and other armed groups, including signatories to the Peace Agreement, when compared with 2014-17^[footnote 110]. Children's access to education was severely limited by conflict and COVID-19, attacks by violent extremist organisations against educational facilities and personnel, internal displacement of populations, and discriminatory and harmful social norms regarding girls and marginalised children, such as those with disabilities. In August 2019, the UK committed up to £30 million of new funding for education in crises in the Sahel and neighbouring countries. Of the funds disbursed by the end of 2020 (£15 million), over £5 million was allocated to support crisis-affected children (50% girls) in Mali to continue their education in 2020 and into 2021.

In 2021, the UK will ensure our collective efforts, whether diplomatic, military, humanitarian or development, support better protection of civilians, enhance civil-military coordination, and help promote and protect human rights. We shall continue to push the Malian transitional Government to progress investigations and carry out trials for human rights violations and abuses.

Myanmar (Burma)

The human rights situation in Myanmar remained poor in 2020. Human rights violations and abuses were committed by both the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's armed forces) and ethnic armed organisations across the country. Heavily affected areas included Chin, Kachin, Rakhine and Shan states. There remained no credible domestic accountability process. The Rohingya and other minorities faced further discrimination as they were excluded from Myanmar's elections in November, mostly on citizenship grounds. Many more voters were disfranchised as a result of cancelled polling in areas of conflict, including Rakhine. The UK called for elections to take place in cancelled areas as soon as feasible. Women's representation in parliament increased, but remained low at 18%.

Around 600,000 Rohingya remained in Rakhine, 126,000 of whom had been confined to camps since 2012. All Rohingya faced severe freedom of movement restrictions which negatively affected their livelihoods and access to services. Previously existing inequalities were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to camps for essential humanitarian relief, which had always been difficult, deteriorated rapidly, resulting in the loss of education, protection, and some nutrition services. The quality and quantity of health, water and sanitation services also deteriorated. Between 2017 and the end of 2020, the UK provided over £44 million to all communities in Rakhine, including £25 million for the Rohingya to support access to services. This included water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, as well as food aid, health, education and skills development.



Boat Parade, Yangon Pride Festival, Myanmar – February 2020, photo credit &Proud.

At the start of the year, conflict between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army (AA) escalated, and Rohingya civilians, as well as ethnic Rakhine people, continued to bear the brunt. Around 120,000 ethnic Rakhine were displaced over the year. Some areas were deliberately cut off from food supplies in a bid to stop the AA's supply routes.

Fighting decreased in Rakhine towards the end of the year. While dialogue between the AA and Tatmadaw was encouraging, the lack of a comprehensive ceasefire left a fragile situation in which protection of civilians could not be guaranteed. Little progress was made on addressing the causes of instability in Rakhine. The UK urged Myanmar to implement the Rakhine Advisory Commission recommendations in full. We agreed with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) that conditions throughout Rakhine, and especially in the north, were not conducive to returns of the 860,000 Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh [\[footnote 111\]](#).

Restrictions continued on access to internet services across several townships in Rakhine and Chin states (imposed in June 2019). The UK convened the UN Security Council in May to discuss the situation in Rakhine and Chin, and called for an end to these restrictions.

The UK continued to push for accountability, urging Myanmar to engage with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) case brought by The Gambia against Myanmar, and to comply with the Provisional Measures Order. In July, the UK included the Tatmadaw's Commander-in-Chief, Min Aung Hlaing, and his Deputy, Soe Win, in its first tranche of sanctions under the Global Human Rights sanctions regime. In response to the continuing risk of further atrocities in Myanmar, particularly in Rakhine, the UK refined its approach to identity-based violence in Myanmar. This new approach includes an enhanced framework for assessing risk, as well as a clear escalation pathway in response to emerging issues.

Children continued to suffer from the effects of the conflict, with an estimated 500,000 children living in conflict or emergency settings. Data showed an overall increase in the rate of children being killed or maimed in the conflict, with 161 reported cases in 2020. There was also an increase in attacks on, and military use of, schools during this period. For example, a school was shelled in February, and children were allegedly used as human shields in October. Altogether, there were 432 grave violations against children in 2020. The UK worked to promote the safe schools declaration in Myanmar.

The use of sexual violence by conflict actors remained a serious problem. In a positive development, in December, three Tatmadaw soldiers were sentenced by a military tribunal to 20 years in prison for the rape of a Rakhine woman. Despite this, military justice remained opaque. There remained no protective laws against domestic violence, the most common form of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). The UK supported over 114,000 women and girls with protection and SGBV-specific services in camps for internally displaced people.

LGBT+ people continued to be criminalised under Myanmar's legal system, and discrimination remained deeply ingrained in many parts of the country. New research from a nationwide survey commissioned by Yangon-based NGOs &PROUD and Colours Rainbow, however, showed that an overwhelming majority of people agreed that LGBT+ people deserved equality and did not think it should be illegal to be an LGBT+ person. Approximately 15,000 people attended Yangon Pride events, which the UK supported. This represented a doubling of numbers compared with the previous two years.

The rights of people with disabilities in Myanmar remained limited. There remained derogatory terminology in legislation and policy documents, and many people with disabilities continued not to feel fully consulted or involved in the authorities' decision-making processes. The UK continued to promote the rights of people with disabilities through programming, for example through directly supporting disabled persons' organisations in peacebuilding programming and providing funding for more disability-inclusive elections.

Censorship remained an issue, as both the military and civilian government exploited outdated laws to restrict freedom of expression. The high profile cases of Maung Saungkha and the Peacock Generation demonstrated that the military continued to target and imprison those who criticised them. At the end of March, the Government of Myanmar issued instructions that blocked 230 websites, including some local ethnic media outlets which had been critical of the Government. The UK raised these issues with the Government.

Little progress was made on modern slavery. As Myanmar continued to be the major supplier of migrant labour in south-east Asia, its citizens, especially those affected by conflict, were vulnerable to trafficking, including for forced marriage in China. The UK provided leadership to address this issue through the multi-donor Livelihoods and Food Security Fund, working to promote safe and gainful migration in the region, and to reduce the vulnerability of women and children to exploitation and trafficking for sexual purposes.

In 2021, the UK will continue to support the ICJ process, work towards a sustainable resolution to the situation in Rakhine, and promote civil liberties and inclusivity across Myanmar^[footnote 112].

Nicaragua

The human rights situation in Nicaragua had been declining since April 2018, when the National Police and pro-government gangs violently put an end to civilian protests, leaving over 300 dead, close to 2,000 injured, and hundreds unlawfully detained^[footnote 113], with some people subjected to torture and other ill-treatment. In 2020, Nicaragua continued to use arbitrary detention, and placed restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, media freedom and other political rights.

The Nicaraguan Government pursued systematic intimidation and persecution of independent media, despite the freedom of the press being enshrined in Nicaragua's Constitution. The executive engaged in a smear campaign against independent journalists, with Vice President Rosario Murillo referring to the media as "dark forces"^[footnote 114]. After 2018, Nicaragua dropped 24 places to rank 117 out of 179 countries in the Reporters Without Borders' 2020 World Press Freedom Index^[footnote 115]. Since the 2018 political crisis, the National Police and pro-government gangs had intimidated journalists and their families, with reports of harassment, physical assaults, death threats, home raids, equipment seizures and office closures^[footnote 116]. According to the Violeta B Chamorro Foundation, a Nicaraguan civil society organisation^[footnote 117], there were 185 attacks on members of the media between January and October in retaliation for their criticism of the Government.

In April, the Centre for Justice and International Law condemned the increasing repression of former political prisoners and their families, human rights defenders and journalists. Despite government assurances that it would release all political prisoners arrested following the protests in 2018, as of 15 October^[footnote 118] more than 100 remained in custody, and there were numerous reports of prisoners being subject to torture and ill-treatment while in prison^[footnote 119]. According to civil society organisations, between 17 and 19 April, there were 65 reported incidents, including physical assaults and threats against people viewed as government critics^[footnote 120]. In September, the International Federation for Human Rights issued a statement, signed by 50 Nicaraguan and international organisations, denouncing repression by the National Police^[footnote 121].

On 27 October, the National Assembly approved the Special Law on Cybercrime^[footnote 122] that further censored digital media. Individuals accused of "promoting or distributing false or misleading information that causes alarm, terror, or unease in the public" could incur jail sentences of up to five years. The ambiguous parameters of the law put journalists and ordinary citizens who expressed critical views online at risk of prosecution.

Freedom House rated Nicaragua as "not free" in their Freedom in the World 2020 index because of the Government's continuing attempts to restrain political participation. The UK and international partners continued to pressure the Nicaraguan Government to enact electoral reforms in line with previous Organization of American States (OAS) recommendations. However, the Government took steps to exclude further political actors from taking part in the political process. Opposition groups, including the Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy and the Blue and White National Unity, reported increasing instances of surveillance and harassment.

The Nicaraguan authorities sought to silence opposition voices and hinder political participation in the run-up to the 2021 presidential elections. On 21 December, legislators passed a law banning opposition candidates from running in the presidential elections. The law entitled 'Defence of the Rights of the People to Independence, Sovereignty and Self-determination for Peace' gave the Government the power to designate citizens as "traitors to the homeland" or "coup-mongers" and to ban them from running for public office. According to the OAS, the law restricted political rights and limited electoral competition, transforming "the 2021 elections into an imposition rather than an election"^[footnote 123].

The UK condemned the Nicaraguan Government's attempts to side-line political opposition through its restrictions on political participation. We were concerned by a constitutional reform establishing life sentences for "hate crimes", which could be used to target those who spoke out against the Government. The UK continued to press the authorities to resume engagement with the opposition and to respect human rights. The UK co-sponsored the UN Human Rights Council's resolution of 19 June, which condemned the human rights violations committed by the Nicaraguan authorities and urged them to stop repression, respect citizens' rights, ensure a meaningful political dialogue, and undertake electoral reform.

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

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

Pakistan

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pakistan's Ministry of Human Rights advocated transgender rights. In February, Pakistan became the first country to include an openly transgender woman in its national delegation to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women Committee. However, same-sex relationships remained illegal, and L.G.B.T.+ people continued to face violence and discrimination.

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

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

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

Russia

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

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

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

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

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

L.G.B.T.+ people continued to face systematic persecution in Chechnya. In December, the UK designated three individuals and an entity responsible for these violations under the UK's Global Human Rights sanctions regime. Two years on from the 2018 OSCE Moscow Mechanism report on human rights violations in Chechnya, the Russian authorities still had not conducted a full investigation, and the climate of impunity described in the Moscow Mechanism Report continued to prevail. The UK condemned the kidnapping and torture in Chechnya of 19-year-old Salman Tepsurkayev, a moderator for the Telegram social media channel '1ADAT'.

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

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

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

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

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

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

In 2021, the UK will remain committed to the protection and promotion of human rights and civil society in Russia, and we shall continue to urge the Russian authorities to implement its international human rights obligations. The UK will also support the new International Crimean Platform, which will bring together the international community to support the return of Crimea to Ukraine.

Saudi Arabia

Progress made under the Vision 2030 economic and social reform programme continued, despite the challenges presented by COVID-19. At the same time, the clampdown on political activity and freedom of expression remained. Reforms provided more opportunities for women and increased protections for migrant workers' rights. The Government took steps to reform the death penalty system, and there was a significant reduction in the use of the death penalty. The Saudi authorities detained a number of high profile individuals, and the trials of a number of existing detainees, including prominent women's human rights defenders, concluded with custodial sentences.

While women's rights remained restricted in Saudi Arabia, reforms enabled women's labour force participation, which continued its upward trend, reaching 31.3% in the third quarter of 2020^[footnote 126]. The World Bank's 'Women, Business and the Law 2020'^[footnote 127] report ranked Saudi Arabia as the most improved country for women's economic opportunities. An increasing number of sectors were opened to women. In July, Saudi Arabia appointed its first female judge and Deputy of the Shura Council. In October, the Government appointed 100 female notaries, expanding the roles available to women in the legal sector. Saudi courts also ruled that women had the legal right to live on their own.^[footnote 128]

The trials of at least 12 women's rights defenders continued. The Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, raised his concern over their detention and treatment during his visit to Saudi Arabia in March. The UK International Ambassador for Human Rights, Rita French, and six European counterparts issued a statement reiterating the call for their release, and expressing disappointment at the transfer of women's rights defender cases to the Specialised Criminal Court for terrorism cases. In December, this Court sentenced prominent activist Loujain al Hathloul to five years, eight months in detention, including a two year ten month suspended sentence. Another activist, Samar Badawi, was sentenced to five years, including two years suspended. The Saudi authorities did not allow diplomats and the media to observe these trials.

In July, the UK sanctioned 20 Saudi nationals for their role in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, under the UK's Global Human Rights sanctions regime. The UK has consistently reiterated that this was a terrible crime, and the Foreign Secretary raised this issue with his counterpart, Saudi Foreign Minister HH Prince Faisal bin Farhan, during his visit to Riyadh in March.

In April, the Saudi Government announced that the death penalty would no longer be imposed as a discretionary punishment on individuals who had committed offences as a minor. These changes did not apply to hudud and qisas crimes, with punishments prescribed by the Quran. In August, the Saudi authorities announced that they would apply the law retrospectively. Official Saudi figures showed that 27 individuals were executed in 2020 compared with 184 in 2019. In July, the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, James Cleverly, raised concern over the use of the death penalty with Dr Awwad al Awwad, President of Saudi Arabia's Human Rights Commission.

Freedom of expression remained highly restricted. The World Press Freedom Index ranked Saudi Arabia 170 out of 180 countries^[footnote 129]. Many political detainees arrested during the 2017 clampdown remained in detention, without clarity on trial proceedings. Allegations of torture, lack of family access, lack of medical care, and prolonged solitary confinement continued. In September, the UK signed a statement at the UN Human Rights Council calling for the release of all political detainees, and noted concern over reports of torture and arbitrary detention.

In June, the US Department of State Trafficking in Persons report^[footnote 130] upgraded Saudi Arabia to Tier II status – from Tier III, the lowest category – reflecting progress made over the previous year. After that, the Saudi Government announced reforms to the kafala work sponsorship system to improve migrant workers' rights. The UK remained concerned by the treatment of domestic workers who were beyond the scope of the kafala reform. In November, with the Saudi Ambassador to the UK, HRH Prince Khalid bin Bandar, the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa raised UK concerns about the treatment of migrants who were held in overcrowded migrant detention centres.

The Saudi Government continued to deliver positive messages on religious tolerance, but restrictions remained on freedom of religion or belief. It continued to be illegal to practise publicly a religion other than Islam, but the reduced presence of the religious police and permission for expatriate non-Muslim faith groups to worship privately improved religious freedom.

In 2021, we shall continue to engage with the Saudi authorities on their plans for reform, particularly on the use of the death penalty and improvements to the observance of women's rights, raise specific cases of concern, and attempt to attend the trials of political detainees.

Somalia

Progress in advancing human rights in Somalia remained slow. Persistent attacks by Al-Shabaab threatened Somalia's stability, and the rights and livelihoods of many of its people. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, locust swarms and flooding exacerbated insecurity across the region, and increased the vulnerability of many.

A number of federal member states blocked plans to hold the first direct elections in 50 years, despite a requirement in the Constitution to hold 'one person one vote' elections and an Electoral Law passed by an overwhelming majority in parliament. In late 2020, the Federal Government scheduled indirect elections for 2021, though arrangements for implementation were disputed. The Federal Government assured UK officials that it would seek to honour a commitment to ensure that at least 30% of MPs in the new parliament should be women, though it remained unclear how this would be achieved. In Somaliland, 'one person, one vote' parliamentary elections were scheduled for 31 May 2021, the first since 2005, alongside local council elections. The UK continued to support efforts to encourage marginalised groups, including women and minority clans, in Somalia and Somaliland to stand as candidates and to exercise their political rights^[footnote 131].

Somalia was ranked 163 of 180 countries in Reporters without Borders' 2020 World Press Freedom Index^[footnote 132], and was among the countries in Africa where the largest number of journalists had been killed in recent years^[footnote 133]. Journalists continued to report harassment, arbitrary detention and intimidation^[footnote 134]. A radio station owned by a minority clan in Somalia and two TV stations in Somaliland were closed down by the authorities. In September, the Federal Government appointed a special prosecutor to investigate crimes against journalists, many of which remained unresolved. Amendments to the 2016 Media Law were passed and some changes were welcomed by civil society organisations, though some said that the Government had too great a role in overseeing the media sector^[footnote 135]. In Somaliland, a long-awaited media law that would decriminalise many media offences remained in draft. A UK-funded programme brought together journalists and law enforcement across five regions of Somaliland to improve mutual understanding.

The UK continued to work through a range of international fora to promote greater respect for human rights in Somalia, including co-sponsoring the resolution with Somalia at the 45th session of the UN Human Rights Council in October 2020^[footnote 136].

There was some evidence that the secondary effects of COVID-19 disproportionately affected women and girls.^[footnote 137] A UK-funded call centre for Somali women aided humanitarian actors through the pandemic. It enabled them to respond to women's changing needs in their programmes, particularly on water, sanitation and hygiene services. More incidents of physical, sexual and gender-based violence (GBV) were reported compared with previous years^[footnote 138]. The UK funded the establishment of a local telephone hotline for reporting incidences of GBV, which provided a safer and more accessible route for women to report cases to the authorities. Through our implementing partners, the UK also provided prevention, mitigation and response services for survivors of GBV by supporting and training legal, clinical and psychological service providers, as well as police forces.

Child, early and forced marriages remained common. In 2020, 16% of married women had been married by the age of 15, and 33% by the age of 18^[footnote 139]. Somalia's female genital mutilation rates remained among the highest in the world, increasing 1% to 99% of women^[footnote 140]. Two competing sexual offence bills were proposed in the Somali parliament. The first was brought by the Federal Government, with the support of civil society organisations, and was aimed at tackling sexual offences. The second, tabled by MPs, would have effectively legalised child and forced marriage. The latter bill ran into significant resistance from Somali citizens, and did not progress. In Somaliland, a similarly reactionary bill was passed by the Somaliland House of Representatives, but was not considered by the upper house during 2020. The UK encouraged the authorities to ensure that it did not become law.

The UK continued to work with the Somali authorities and international partners to reduce incidents of abuse or exploitation by Somali security forces. We supported a range of training designed to protect civilians and to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers, and enabled more women to engage in peacekeeping.

There were five reported executions by the Somali Federal Government and four by the Puntland authorities, a small decrease since 2019^[footnote 141]. In Somaliland, 12 prisoners were executed in 2020, the highest number since an effective moratorium ended in 2015. The UK registered with Somali and Somaliland authorities its longstanding policy of opposing the death penalty in all circumstances.

In 2021, through the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), the UK will run Women, Peace and Security (WPS) training on inclusive access to justice – continuing its 'train the trainer' work. A finalised WPS digital toolkit app will be produced to disseminate research findings, and lessons learned from training sessions. The UK will also support inclusive elections in Somaliland.

South Sudan

The human rights situation remained dire in South Sudan. The UN reported violations and abuses committed by all sides in the conflict, including the targeted killing of civilians, acts of sexual violence, the recruitment of child soldiers, attacks on schools and hospitals, abductions, and the forcible displacement of communities. These occurred against a backdrop of a humanitarian and food insecurity crisis affecting millions of people.

Despite the formation of a unity government in February, delays in implementation of the 2018 Peace Agreement contributed to governance vacuums and a significant increase in sub-national conflict and localised violence, particularly in Jonglei and Central Equatoria regions. The UN reported the killing of over 2,000 civilians in the first quarter of 2020, a 45% rise compared with the same period in 2019^[footnote 142]. All sides continued to target civilians deliberately; raids on villages, public executions and sexual violence were used to displace people, or as punishment. Fighting also forced hundreds of thousands of people from their homes, many of whom then faced severe food insecurity^[footnote 143]. The recruitment of child soldiers was a persistent problem, exacerbated by school closures due to COVID-19, which led to a further 2.2 million children being out of school^[footnote 144].



HRH The Countess of Wessex meets women activists at an International Women's Day event—March 2020, Juba, South Sudan.

Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), including the rape and abduction of women and girls for sexual slavery, continued to be prevalent^[footnote 145]. Child and forced marriage, often related to abductions, remained an issue. More broadly, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), including domestic violence, continued, with the COVID-19 related closure of schools making children more vulnerable. Survivors of CRSV and SGBV struggled to access support and protection from intimidation. A continued culture of impunity meant that there was little accountability for these crimes^[footnote 146]. The UK urged progress on tackling SGBV, and HRH The Countess of Wessex visited South Sudan in March to champion the inclusion of women at a critical time in the implementation of peace in the country and meet survivors to shine a spotlight on the prevalence of CRSV and SGBV. UK support also included a five-year (2016-20), £22 million programme to deliver SGBV prevention and response services, including psychosocial support for survivors.

Political space and freedom of expression continued to be restricted, notably by the actions of the National Security Service. The UK welcomed the release of a number of political prisoners in January. However, security services continued to arrest and arbitrarily detain people alleged to have criticised the Government. Notable cases included the detention without charge for 117 days of Kanybil Noon, a political activist. He was released only on condition that he would cease criticism of the Government. Human Rights Watch detailed allegations that government security agencies used sexual violence as a form of torture and humiliation, particularly targeted at political prisoners^[footnote 147].

Limitations to media freedom continued, and South Sudan remained high-risk for journalists. In one example, a journalist was detained for six days for reporting on US sanctions^[footnote 148]. The UK was concerned that the South Sudanese authorities had made no progress on investigating the killing in 2017 of US-UK journalist Christopher Allen, despite continued UK pressure and calls for South Sudan to investigate, including at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in September^[footnote 149]. The UK funded programmes on media training and COVID-19 literacy for journalists, and a leading South Sudanese journalist, Mary Goch, was named in November as runner-up for the UK-Canada Media Freedom Award.

Widespread impunity persisted, and no meaningful progress was made towards establishing transitional justice mechanisms, including a Hybrid Court, a commitment in the 2018 Peace Agreement. Mobile courts, supported by the UN, allowed some prosecutions, but the scale of the problem remained huge, and justice was rarely delivered. The death penalty was still in use, though the Court of Appeals did quash the death penalty sentence of an individual who had been a child when the crime was committed. The UK continued its leading role on South Sudan at the HRC, including on extending the mandate of the UN Commission on Human Rights, an important tool for accountability. During the Interactive Dialogue in September, the UK also called on South Sudan's Government to tackle SGBV and end impunity for perpetrators^[footnote 150].

The humanitarian situation deteriorated further, and South Sudan remained one of the most dangerous operating environments for humanitarian workers in the world, with nine killed in 2020^[footnote 151]. 6.35 million people faced severe food insecurity in October and November while, in December, one county was declared in likely famine, and a further five in famine-like conditions^[footnote 152]. Localised violence and bureaucratic impediments obstructed humanitarian access, making the situation worse. The UK worked with UN agencies, donors and implementing partners to provide life-saving assistance, and pressed the government to act to help its own citizens and protect humanitarian workers.

In 2021, the UK will continue to press the South Sudanese government to tackle key human rights concerns, including SGBV and restrictions on freedom of expression. We shall also continue our leading role in Geneva in support of the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan. Underpinning this, we shall push for the implementation of the 2018 Peace Agreement, to help tackle some of the drivers of the human rights situation.

Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

The overall human rights situation in Sri Lanka continued to deteriorate in 2020^[footnote 153]. The Government delivered free and peaceful parliamentary elections despite the COVID-19 pandemic, and maintained low numbers of COVID-19 cases compared to global figures. However, there was increased surveillance and intimidation of civil society, constraints placed on communities practising religious burial rites, a number of lengthy detentions without charge, and several setbacks on post-conflict accountability and reconciliation.

At the UN Human Rights Council in February, the Sri Lankan Government withdrew its support for resolutions 30/1, 34/1, and 40/1 on post-conflict transitional justice, accountability and reconciliation. Although it announced its commitment to a domestic mechanism for reconciliation and accountability, there was no progress on this. The UK made clear its commitment to reconciliation and accountability in statements delivered on behalf of the Core Group^[footnote 154] on Sri Lanka at the HRC in February, June and September.

Sri Lanka's commitment to accountability was further called into question in March when President Rajapaksa pardoned and released former Army Staff Sergeant Sunil Ratnayake, who was convicted in 2015 for the murder of eight civilians (including children) in Jaffna in 2000. The President continued to appoint controversial military figures accused of war crimes to government roles, while civilian functions such as the Secretariat for Non-Governmental Organizations were brought under the control of the Ministry of Defence.

In October, the Government passed the 20th Amendment to the Constitution, which extended executive power over appointments to the judiciary and independent institutions, and reversed several important institutional checks and balances.

In March, the President dissolved parliament ahead of elections, which were then twice postponed because of the COVID-19 outbreak. Although the Government went on to deliver peaceful and democratic elections in August, the delay resulted in a lack of parliamentary oversight between March and August. The Government instead formed several presidential 'taskforces' without parliamentary scrutiny, including to oversee the COVID-19 response.

In March, the Government also announced a policy of mandating cremations for all COVID-19 deaths, despite World Health Organization guidelines that permitted burials. This particularly affected Muslim and some Christian communities, for whom burial is an essential rite. In December, the Supreme Court dismissed several petitions that challenged this policy. The outbreak of COVID-19 also led to an increase in anti-Muslim sentiment, fuelled by hate speech and disinformation suggesting that Muslims were 'carriers' of COVID-19 and were violating prevention measures. In June, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, expressed concern over the clampdown on freedom of expression, noting an announcement made by the police in April to arrest those critical of the Government's COVID-19 response.

Through the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) programme and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK supported victims of sexual and gender-based violence who were particularly affected by lockdowns and stay-at-home measures. The UK also helped build media capacity to highlight the impact of COVID-19 on marginalised communities. In October, media reports alleged that judicial medical officers and police had conducted invasive intimate examinations on L.G.B.T.+ persons without their consent, following which the Justice Minister Ali Sabry gave instructions to halt and investigate the practice.

Throughout the year, the Government continued to use the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), despite a renewed pledge at the 43rd session of the HRC to review the legislation. In April, prominent human rights lawyer Hejaaz Hizbullah was arrested by Sri Lanka's Criminal Investigation Department under the PTA. Hejaaz was detained without charge or presentation before a court. International rights groups noted an increase in intimidation, surveillance and online abuse, including threats to lawyers, journalists, families of disappeared persons and individuals working on human rights and anti-corruption.

In November, unrest at Mahara prison over COVID-19 concerns resulted in the death of eleven inmates and injury of over 150. A committee appointed to investigate the unrest concluded that the inmates' demands had been reasonable, and autopsies revealed that all inmates had died of gunshot wounds. In November, the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka wrote to the Inspector General of Police to highlight an increase in deaths in custody, and released a prison study which noted that the treatment of prisoners fell below international standards.

In 2021, the UK will continue to press for progress on human rights, gender equality and protections for minorities and vulnerable groups. We shall continue to invest in ambitious programmes which support conflict-affected communities, promote the role of civil society, facilitate social cohesion, and underline the critical importance of post-conflict reconciliation and accountability.

Sudan

Sudan took further positive steps towards human rights reform. This built on earlier commitments following the removal of Omar al-Bashir as President in 2019. Notable progress was made on freedom of religion or belief, and the rights of women and girls. However, significant challenges remained, particularly in relation to the increase in intercommunal violence. These challenges reflected the scale of the task for the civilian-led Sudanese Government after decades of misrule and oppression.

Through its programme work, the UK provided support to Sudanese civil society, particularly on the rights of women and girls, and on media freedom. In July, the Government of Sudan passed a series of legal reforms, including the criminalisation of female genital mutilation (FGM). The UK had long supported the Sudanese-led movement to end FGM. We continued to help combat the practice by facilitating community dialogue, providing training for medical professionals, and working with religious leaders. In other project work, the UK supported media freedom by providing training to over 1,000 journalists to strengthen local reporting. We also helped to develop a Media Reform Roadmap to feed into Sudan's National Action Plan, which led to the creation of a committee of national experts to oversee reform efforts.

Apostasy (which carried the death penalty) was decriminalised in July and there were efforts to facilitate inter-faith dialogue. For example, the Juba Peace Agreement, signed by the Government of Sudan and a number of armed groups in October, mandated the establishment of an independent commission for religious freedom. While these were important steps towards promoting freedom of religion or belief in Sudan, further reforms remained outstanding, including amending status laws discriminating against women and girls, ending flogging as punishment for religious crimes, and reforming blasphemy laws.

Despite some positive developments, progress on transitional justice was limited. The October Juba Peace Agreement outlined transitional justice as a key component to ensuring stability in Sudan. Following the Agreement, the Government of Sudan welcomed the first visit of the International Criminal Court (ICC) Chief Prosecutor to Khartoum to discuss cases related to war crimes committed in Darfur, including charges against former President Bashir. The UK commended this cooperation and urged that the ICC be allowed access to witnesses and crime sites. Less progress was made by the Investigation Commission into the killing of protesters on 3 June 2019, with no report yet published. The then UK Ambassador to Sudan, Irfan Siddiq, met the Commission's Chair and pressed for the investigation to be concluded swiftly and transparently. Instances of alleged torture by elements of the Security Services, which led to the deaths of two individuals, further demonstrated the importance of accountability and justice as part of Sudan's transition.

The UK continued to take a leading role in building international support for Sudan, both in multilateral fora and as part of the Friends of Sudan, a grouping of international countries, including the UK, dedicated to supporting Sudan's successful transition to a fully democratic state. At the October session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), we co-sponsored the annual Resolution on Sudan, which committed technical support and capacity building to assist the Sudanese Government's efforts to improve human rights. The UK also provided £400,000 towards the establishment of a presence for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Khartoum, which became operational in 2020. The OHCHR played a crucial role in monitoring human rights developments, and had already delivered training workshops on international human rights law for senior military commanders by the end of 2020. The UK engaged the Sudanese Government and the OHCHR on the swift establishment of four field offices outside of Khartoum, to ensure a holistic approach across Sudan.

The OHCHR, as part of the UN Country Team, worked closely with the UN-African Union peacekeeping mission in Darfur to protect and promote the rights of civilians. In this regard, we welcomed the Government's National Protection of Civilians strategy as a demonstration of its commitment to assuming full responsibilities, although it will take time to build the required capacity. The increase in intercommunal violence and civilian displacement demonstrated the complexity of the drivers and root causes of the conflict. The UK urged the Sudanese authorities to work with OHCHR and the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), which has the mandate to support the peace process and assist the political transition.

In 2021, the UK will encourage the Government of Sudan to demonstrate full respect for human rights, including lobbying for the ratification of the UN Convention Against Torture (CAT) and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). We shall deliver programmes that promote long-term stability in conflict-affected areas, support marginalised groups, and encourage reconciliation within conflicted communities. We shall also contribute substantively to efforts concerning Sudan at the HRC, including its Universal Periodic Review, and in negotiations over the next iteration of the annual resolution on Sudan.

Syria

The human rights situation in Syria showed no improvement in 2020, despite a measurable decrease in violent conflict. An unprecedented economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic further increased the suffering of the Syrian people. Arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, torture, sexual violence and severe restrictions on civil and political rights remained widespread. The Syrian regime was the main perpetrator of these violations, but abuses were also committed by proscribed terrorist organisations and other armed groups.

In its March report^[footnote 155], the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) accused the Syrian regime of war crimes in its use of cluster munitions against a camp for displaced persons and repeated attacks on medical facilities. The COI also stated that the Russian air force had committed "the war crime of launching indiscriminate attacks in civilian areas" in reference to attacks on a civilian compound in southern Idlib in summer 2019. In April, the UN Board of Inquiry (BOI) reported on its investigations into six attacks on civilian infrastructure and UN-supported facilities in north-west Syria in 2019. The BOI found it "highly probable" that the regime and its allies were responsible for the attacks on one school, two hospitals and a centre for child protection services, and "plausible" that they had attacked a further hospital. Human Rights Watch's report in October named ten senior Syrian and Russian civilians and military officials who had command responsibility for attacks on civilians and whose involvement may have amounted to crimes against humanity^[footnote 156].

The ceasefire agreed between Russia and Turkey on 5 March largely held, but most of the 1.4 million people who had fled previous indiscriminate bombardments remained in squalid displacement camps in northern Idlib. Increasing numbers of women and girls in the overcrowded camps suffered sexual and domestic violence, and there were more forced, early marriages. In July, the COI reported that political opponents and media activists in Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)-controlled Idlib who expressed dissent against HTS had been detained, tortured and killed.

In regime-controlled areas, human rights violations continued unabated. The COI highlighted that security operations continued to violate residents' civil, economic, political and social rights. Checkpoints blocked residents from sending their children to school and from accessing healthcare. The COI's report in September stated that recent cases of enforced disappearance, torture, sexual violence and deaths in custody across regime-held areas amounted to crimes against humanity. Detentions, targeted killings and assassinations increased in Daraa, Suwayda and in rural Damascus, increasing tensions with the local population. The regime also continued to confiscate property and restrict access for returning displaced persons and refugees.

In the Turkish-controlled north-west, scores of civilians were killed and injured during shelling and rocket attacks. The COI's report in September noted a number of abuses allegedly carried out by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army militia group, including hostage-taking, torture, rape, looting, property confiscations, and appropriation of agricultural land. These all occurred in predominantly Kurdish-majority areas. Turkey rejected these allegations. In the north-east, over 60,000 women and children—nearly 35,000 under twelve—remained detained in the Al Hol and Al Roj camps in poor conditions. Insufficient resources and restrictions on humanitarian access contributed to deteriorating camp conditions.

In July, the UK pledged at least £300 million at the Brussels conference on 'Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region', and provided £33 million through UN and NGO partners to help mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 in Syria, including through healthcare, food, water and sanitation.

The UK sustained pressure to improve human rights in Syria, including through UK leadership on three Syria resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council, which again mandated the work of the COI. We repeatedly echoed the pleas of the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, for meaningful action on the issue of detainees and missing persons. The UK continued to support programmes to help build Syrian women and girls' long-term social, political and economic empowerment.

The UK supported accountability efforts towards prosecuting perpetrators of human rights and international humanitarian law violations. Our Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) funding supported the International Commission on Missing Persons to identify and preserve remains in mass graves in north-east Syria, to give the families of the deceased some closure, and to support accountability for Daesh crimes. In April, the trial of two former members of the Syrian security service began in Germany, supported by evidence gathered by the UK-funded Commission for International Justice and Accountability. The UK was at the forefront of accountability efforts for Syria's use of chemical weapons, including an Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons Executive Council Decision in July.

We continued to support the UN International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) to fulfil its mandate of investigating the most serious human rights violations and abuses committed during the conflict, including through an additional £285,000 of financial support.

In 2021, the UK will continue pursuing accountability for the most serious crimes committed in Syria and, noting the grim, ten-year milestone of the conflict in March, the achievement of a genuine, inclusive and credible political settlement, as the only way to deliver a lasting peace.

Turkmenistan

There was no recognisable improvement in the overall human rights situation in Turkmenistan in 2020. The principal issues were continuing allegations of torture, sexual violence, and poor conditions in prisons, restrictions on freedom of expression and on freedom of religion or belief, gender discrimination, and restrictions on the rights of L.G.B.T.+ people. There were continued reports of victims of enforced disappearances being held in incommunicado detention. Given the likelihood of persecution in-country, most human rights defenders still worked from abroad.

Conditions in prisons were reported to be harsh^[footnote 157], with Human Rights Watch stating that torture and ill-treatment were widespread^[footnote 158]. The Prove They Are Alive! campaign noted that, while some political prisoners had been able to receive visitors, “a large number of the disappeared continue to be held in complete isolation without any contact with the outside world despite the fact that this type of isolation contradicts Turkmenistan’s national legislation and its international commitments”^[footnote 159].

Freedom of expression continued to be severely restricted. All media in Turkmenistan remained under state control, foreign publications were prohibited, and most social media and many internet sites were blocked. The authorities also sought to block the use of VPNs. Reporters Without Borders ranked Turkmenistan 179 of 180 countries in its World Press Freedom Index^[footnote 160]. Protests or demonstrations were not tolerated by the authorities. There were allegations of imprisonment of at least one person who had shared on social media unapproved information about investigations into COVID-19.

Various reports raised concerns over women’s rights and gender equality. As in 2019, there were reports that some female drivers had been harassed by traffic police, and that women had been prohibited from obtaining or renewing driving licenses (although it appeared that the authorities began to reverse these restrictions towards the end of the year)^[footnote 161]. Priority in employment often appeared to be given to men, and women faced obstacles to their professional progress. Unregistered religious marriages reportedly took place, which left women without the protection of the law in cases of divorce, or access to inheritance, and there were complaints of forced marriages in some rural areas where girls were expected to navigate the justice system alone to find help. Parents often prioritised the education of their sons, failing to offer direct assistance and suitable alternatives and leaving girls behind and unable to fulfil their ambitions. The Government appeared to do little to act against such behaviour. The British Embassy in Ashgabat partnered with the UNFPA to support the launch of a hotline service offering women and girls confidential, immediate and evidence-based information on their reproductive rights, existing reproductive health services, and overall health advice, as well as advice on protecting against the risk of domestic violence.

Although Turkmenistan worked with the UN on a partnership agreement, including rule of law and human rights elements, there was little evidence of progress on the range of Universal Periodic Review (U.P.R.) recommendations that Turkmenistan accepted in 2018. No mid-term progress report was produced as scheduled in 2020. Turkmenistan did not appear to have worked in partnership with the International Labour Organization to eliminate the use of forced labour in the cotton harvest, despite agreeing to a 2018 U.P.R. recommendation to do so. Turkmenistan accepted the UK’s 2018 U.P.R. recommendation to sign the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT), but by the end of 2020 had taken no action to put this commitment into effect.

There were 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 were generally for two years, the length of the compulsory military service. It continued to prove difficult to register, or re-register, a religious organisation in Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan continued to criminalise sexual intercourse between men, with a penalty of up to two years imprisonment—it was reported that this law had been applied in 2020^[footnote 162].

International NGOs, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, were not permitted to enter Turkmenistan, and concerns were raised about the difficulty in registering NGOs and about harassment of the few human rights activists in the country^[footnote 163]. There were reports that the families of overseas-based activists had been subject to intimidation by the Turkmen authorities^[footnote 164].

In 2021, we will continue to promote human rights through our policy and project work—including training journalists on media literacy, new media formats and fundamental standards—and will also engage with the Turkmen Government for this purpose.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan continued to move in the right direction in several human rights areas, especially women’s rights and efforts to reduce forced labour. Legislative reform was under consideration regarding civil society and freedom of religion or belief, and a public consultation on decriminalising same-sex relations between men was announced. Through the use of online portals, Uzbekistan took active steps to consult citizens, and the authorities engaged directly with local and international civil society, and the diplomatic community in Tashkent, on its legislative reforms. However, it was unclear how far-reaching these planned legislative reforms might be, and in some areas the situation worsened, in particular the weakening of media freedom and a lack of action on torture allegations.

In comparison to previous years, women’s rights were discussed more openly within government and among the public, in part because the COVID-19 pandemic turned the spotlight on serious issues such as discrimination and domestic violence. The Government took some steps in response, including establishing hotlines for sufferers of domestic abuse, and increasing efforts to highlight support networks and helplines. However, greater legislative change continued to be required: rape within marriage was not explicitly criminalised, women’s property and residency rights remained weak, and divorce continued to be difficult for women, including for those suffering domestic abuse.

The authorities further increased penalties for forced labour, making it a criminal rather than civil offence. The Government ran campaigns to raise public awareness of these legislative changes, and continued to signal its commitment to eradicate forced labour. Uzbekistan ended all state quotas for cotton production, and encouraged private sector investment and mechanisation, all aimed at reducing forced labour.

Uzbekistan announced its intention to hold consultations on reviewing the law criminalising sexual intercourse between men. This announcement was a positive step towards a more open discussion of this issue, in a country where there had been an aversion to accepting same-sex relations. However, these consultations did not take place in 2020, and the nature and timings of the consultations remained unknown. The L.G.B.T.+ community in Uzbekistan continued to suffer persecution and discrimination. Anecdotal evidence suggested that the police blackmailed members of the L.G.B.T.+ community, and that abuse from religious and nationalist groups grew, often buoyed by local media which reported negatively on L.G.B.T.+ issues.

Uzbekistan continued to allow the practice of all major religions, and ensure their protection under the law. In December, the US removed Uzbekistan from its ‘Special Watch List’ for religious freedom, in recognition of continued progress with reform in this area. The Government submitted a draft law on religious freedom to the Venice Commission, reflecting continued openness and engagement on freedom of religion or belief. The Venice Commission responded, and the international community submitted a number of comments and recommendations on the draft, including on the registration of new religious groups, which remained heavily controlled by local authorities. The Government did not respond to these recommendations during 2020. There were also reports that the authorities retained significant control and influence in a number of areas relating to Islam, particularly the control of sermons.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev highlighted in keynote speeches the importance of a more vibrant civil society, and a revised Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) Code was under preparation. However, NGO registration remained difficult and opaque and, in many cases, applications to register were repeatedly rejected without explanation by the authorities.

There were reports of torture and mistreatment: at least two individuals died in police custody, and allegations of sexual abuse were made against the police. Despite being raised by the British Embassy, the UN and others, investigations into these and other allegations of torture were rare and lacked transparency. The situation was exacerbated by Uzbekistan's limited legal definition of torture, and a 15-year statute of limitation.

Closed court hearings remained common, undermining transparency and trust in the legal and judicial processes. As in previous years, numerous individuals claimed to have been denied due process, including access to lawyers.

Despite the progress achieved in 2019, media freedom worsened in 2020. Websites such as Facebook were blocked on several occasions, and there were numerous examples of journalists being pressured to remove or not publish articles that were critical of officials or official policy. For example, one blogger was arrested for live-streaming a protest, was dismissed from their employment and placed in a psychiatric facility, while another was extradited from Kyrgyzstan, allegedly for treason, with his case being dismissed only after intervention at very senior levels. The authorities used COVID-19 as an opportunity to crack down on independent journalism by punishing 'fake news', and several journalists and bloggers were arrested under this charge.

In 2020, the UK used programme funds locally to increase the capacity of state and non-state media to increase the supply of, and access to, engaging and informative high-quality media content in Uzbekistan. We also supported the Uzbek parliament in their establishment of a human rights committee based on the model of the UK's Joint Committee on Human Rights, and worked with a local NGO on the provision of free legal advice to the public on new legislation (including COVID-19 regulations).

In 2021, we shall continue supporting further reforms, civil service capacity building, media freedom and the rule of law. We also intend to work constructively with Uzbekistan at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, particularly on women's rights, preventing torture and media freedom.

Venezuela

The protracted political crisis in Venezuela continued in 2020. The UN's Independent International Fact Finding Mission (IIGFM) found "reasonable grounds to believe that Venezuelan authorities and security forces... planned and executed serious human rights violations, some of which—including arbitrary killings and the systematic use of torture—amount to crimes against humanity"^[footnote 165]. The UN also condemned modern slavery, child labour, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and the exploitation of indigenous populations in the Arco Minero Orinoco mining region. The year ended with Nicolás Maduro tightening his grip on power following fraudulent legislative elections on 6 December.

Extrajudicial executions, torture, sexual violence, the operation of clandestine detention centres, enforced disappearances, and politically motivated arbitrary detentions were among the IIGFM's findings published in September 2020. By tracing the chains of command in the country's security agencies, the IIGFM concluded there were reasonable grounds to believe that the Venezuelan authorities and security forces had planned and executed human rights violations which amounted to crimes against humanity. Following the IIGFM's findings, the UK in December sanctioned three security officials involved in human rights violations under its Global Human Rights sanctions regime. The UK was the first country to take such action following the IIGFM report.

In July, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) exposed illegal deforestation and modern slavery in the Orinoco Mining Arc^[footnote 166]. The mines were largely controlled by armed groups and criminals who carried out extreme punishments and executions. Child labour, human trafficking, sexual exploitation and the exploitation of indigenous populations were reportedly widespread.

The IIGFM and the OHCHR's mandates were renewed for two years in September's session of the UN Human Rights Council. The Prosecutor of the ICC continued to make progress in Venezuela's preliminary examination, after finding that crimes within the jurisdiction of the Court had occurred in the country.

Between 2015 and 2020, regime forces killed 27,856 people in instances of alleged 'resistance to authority'^[footnote 167]. Of the 11,891 violent deaths recorded in 2020, 30% of which were still under investigation at the end of the year, security operations were found to be responsible for over half. Although the total number of deaths in 2020 was lower than in previous years, this was the first time that killings by the police and military forces exceeded those committed by criminals.

The COVID-19 pandemic seriously incapacitated the justice system for most of the year. Fewer than 10% of gender-based violence complaints reached formal court proceedings. With the UK's support, two local organisations, Proyecto Mujeres and Mulier, created and promoted a directory with legal, psychological and emergency services for victims of domestic violence. The UK sponsored a project to educate girls through sports and workshops on leadership, sexual education, public speaking and how to challenge gender-based violence.

The Maduro regime continued to undermine the National Assembly in 2020. In the run-up to December's parliamentary elections, the Maduro-regime controlled Supreme Court suspended the ruling bodies of three opposition parties and replaced them with government supporters, thereby undermining Venezuelans' right to free and fair elections. It also appointed a politicised National Electoral Council (CNE). Leading opposition parties refused to participate in legislative elections that were not free, fair or credible.

The UK and others in the international community, including the US, EU, and members of the Lima Group^[footnote 168], rejected the validity of the elections.

The regime continued to exert pressure on civil society and NGOs. The Centre for Human Rights Defenders and Justice, a local NGO, recorded 303 attacks against human rights defenders (HRDs), ranging from stigmatisation, harassment, cyber-attacks, threats, illegal raids, detentions, to mistreatment and torture. Healthcare workers and journalists sharing or publishing information on social media questioning official data or policies were subjected to regime intimidation. According to IPYS, a local NGO, 198 journalists fell victim to attacks including harassment, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions and even two killings^[footnote 169]. The UK raised the profile of the work of HRDs, funded capacity building programmes, and publicly condemned the harassment of journalists.

Venezuela was placed on Oxfam's list of the top ten countries where the food crisis was more severe and getting worse because of the COVID-19 pandemic^[footnote 170]. The World Food Programme was not allowed to enter the country to support food provision for the 9.3 million people who faced moderate or severe food insecurity^[footnote 171]. Rising food prices, petrol and domestic gas shortages, and defective water and electricity services, were among the significant daily challenges faced by the population, especially outside Caracas. Around 500 to 700 people fled the country daily, even with the borders legally closed. The UK was the third largest donor of ODA funding

inside Venezuela, supporting the UN and other international organisations to deliver life-saving programmes to address health, water and sanitation, nutrition and protection. 80% of the £14 million contributed by the UK in 2020 to help with the Venezuela crisis was spent inside Venezuela, with the remainder used for regional programmes addressing the needs of Venezuelan refugees and migrants.

In 2021, the UK will continue to support an independent and diverse civil society in Venezuela, and oppose abuses of power and call out violations of human rights by the regime.

Yemen

The human rights situation in Yemen remained dire in the sixth year of the conflict. There were reports of human rights violations and abuses by all parties to the conflict, including attacks on freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression, women's rights, humanitarian access, enjoyment of social and economic rights, and protection from recruitment of child soldiers, arbitrary detention, torture and sexual violence.

The UK continued to encourage all parties to find a political solution to the conflict, to help create the conditions necessary for the legitimate government to improve its capacity to protect human rights and address the humanitarian crisis. We supported the UN Group of Eminent Experts to examine the human rights situation in Yemen, and encouraged accountability for violations and abuses by calling on all the parties to the conflict to engage constructively with the Group, protect human rights and comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. Following the Independent Yemeni National Commission's publication of its sixth biannual report, the UK pressed the Government of Yemen to implement the recommendations.

The UK provided over £200 million in response to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen for the financial year 2020/21, bringing our total commitment to over £1 billion since the conflict began. In 2020, UK aid supported at least 500,000 vulnerable people each month to buy food, and provided over one million people with improved water supply and sanitation. By May, the UN Office of the Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs reported that an all-time high of 16.8 million people were affected by access constraints, with aid delivery obstructed in Houthi-controlled areas.

The UN noted that from 2015 to 2020 gender-based violence had risen by 63%^[footnote 172]. An estimated 75% of internally displaced people were women and girls, with around 20% of households headed by girls under 18. The UK offered emergency cash assistance for displaced women, enabling them to access vital services and psychosocial support. We provided £31 million to UNICEF to supply emergency cash to 1.5 million families to mitigate against COVID-19 impacts, approximately half given directly to women.

The UK continued to condemn the use of child soldiers and reiterated our commitment to protecting children in armed conflict. A UN Secretary-General report in June highlighted that 686 children had been recruited into armed forces over the course of the previous year, with a total of 4,042 recorded grave violations against children^[footnote 173]. In November, the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, James Cleverly, co-hosted an event with Save the Children on ending the use of children in armed conflict, promoting children's education and protecting female peacebuilders.

Religious minority groups continued to face persecution. In particular, the UK closely monitored the treatment of the Baha'is, including through meeting their representatives in the UK, and lobbying the relevant authorities. On 30 July, six members of the Baha'i faith community, previously detained by the Houthis, were released and left the country safely. This included Hamed bin Haydara, who had been imprisoned since 2013 and had been sentenced to death by Houthi courts. We welcomed this long overdue release, but were concerned that the detainees had been held for their beliefs, and that Houthi courts had declared them fugitives who could not live freely in their own country.

The Houthis continued to attack media freedom and to detain journalists arbitrarily. We condemned the Houthis' use of arbitrary detention and their decision to sentence four Yemeni journalists to death for their reporting. We called on all parties to the conflict to guarantee the safety of journalists, so that they could work without fear of detention or reprisals, and exercise their right to freedom of expression^[footnote 174]. British national Luke Symons also remained detained by Houthi authorities in Yemen. The UK continued to push for his release on humanitarian grounds.

The UN Civilian Impact Monitoring Project recorded 1,508 civilian casualties between January and September 2020, and widespread damage to infrastructure including hospitals, schools and water systems. On 30 December, the Houthis attacked Aden international airport as the newly formed cabinet arrived, killing 27 civilians, and injuring more than 100. The UK condemned the attack^[footnote 175]. The UK continued to monitor incidents of concern, including allegations of violations of international humanitarian law relating to Coalition airstrikes in Yemen. The UK regularly raised with Saudi Arabia the importance of international humanitarian law and of conducting thorough and conclusive investigations into alleged violations. We provided training courses, advice, and guidance to support the Saudi military's compliance with international humanitarian law. This included providing training to the Joint Incident Assessment Team on best practice for investigations.

In 2021, the UK will continue to engage with all parties in Yemen to promote and protect human rights, especially on issues relating to arbitrary detention, social exclusion, freedom of religion or belief, and freedom of expression and association. We will also work on women's rights and humanitarian access, and on preventing sexual violence and the use of child soldiers.

Zimbabwe

The human rights situation in Zimbabwe did not improve in 2020. The human rights monitoring group, Zimbabwe Peace Project, recorded 2,825 human rights violations in 2020^[footnote 176], similar to the total in 2019. The majority of violations were due to heavy-handed policing of COVID-19 regulations by the Zimbabwe Republic Police, as well as targeted abductions, arbitrary arrests, and detentions linked to planned protests in July.

Incidents included the self-reported abduction, torture and sexual assault of opposition Movement of Democratic Change Alliance party members Joana Mamombe MP, Cecilia Chimbi and Netsai Marova, on 13 May. They were arrested after police took them in for questioning over organising a demonstration in violation of COVID-19 regulations. The Government continued to deny involvement in abductions and torture, instead pointing to actions by an unspecified 'third force', or attempting to discredit those who reported violations. There was little evidence of sustained and impartial investigations by law enforcement officers.

In July, authorities took pre-emptive and heavy-handed action to prevent large-scale protests. These were fuelled by growing frustration following corruption scandals, imploding healthcare provision, and the collapsing economy. The authorities detained opposition politicians and journalists for encouraging participation in such protests, and cases against journalist Hopewell Chin'ono, and opposition politicians Job Sikhala and Jacob Ngarivhume, were continuing at the end of the year. The Government continued to use the legal system to silence critics, suppress opposition and discourage protest. Meanwhile, the contrasting treatment of individuals arrested for corruption and connected to the ruling party showed that Zimbabwe was far from achieving equality before the law.

The Government of Zimbabwe still had not implemented in a meaningful way the Commission of Inquiry's recommendations^[footnote 177] following the violence on 1 August 2018, when members of the Zimbabwean security services opened fire on protesters, killing six and injuring many more. This was an important indicator of a lack of political will to hold key state and military officials accountable, either for the events in August 2018 or for the violations committed by security services in the January 2019 crackdown. The latter resulted in the deaths of 17 people, with reports of rape and indiscriminate door-to-door raids by the Zimbabwean security services.

We welcomed the continued legislative processes to replace the restrictive Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act and Broadcasting Services Act. However, continued implementation of these laws restricted freedom of expression, with arrests and harassment of media practitioners and citizen journalists for expressing their views on social media. The Media Institute of Southern Africa reported 49 human rights violations against journalists in 2020^[footnote 178]. The Government claimed it had ended the state monopoly on television broadcasting by granting six television licenses in November. However, companies which were awarded licenses were closely connected to the state and military.

According to the UN World Food Programme, half the population required food assistance. In response, F.C.D.O. provided funding to support 418,000 people. The Zimbabwean Government claimed to support 736,000 households. However, there were frequent reports that this assistance was irregular, and often distributed in ways designed to boost support for the ruling party.

Zimbabwe's already high rates of gender-based violence (GBV) were exacerbated by the COVID-19 response. NGOs received a 60% increase in reported cases of GBV compared to the pre-lockdown period^[footnote 179]. Other challenges in Zimbabwe put women at risk, including water shortages leading to queues at water points overnight and women being exposed to sexual exploitation. There were also several reports of police officers harassing women while enforcing lockdown. The UK provided technical assistance to GBV service organisations, enabling them to respond better to the increase in GBV cases.

The UK continued to hold the Zimbabwean Government to account on its commitments to advancing citizens' constitutional rights. We met persecuted activists, pro-democracy campaigners, parliamentarians, and leaders from across the political spectrum to encourage engagement, dialogue and a more open society, with the rights of all Zimbabweans respected.

The UK continued to invest in the work of multiple civil society organisations (CSOs) in Zimbabwe focusing on accountability, media freedom and access to justice, as well as the defence and promotion of human rights. This included funding for several CSOs working to tackle gender-based violence in the home and in communities, and by security sector personnel. We also provided significant support to lawyers representing individuals arrested or detained by the state, in order to defend their constitutional and other legal rights.

In 2021, the UK will continue to hold the Zimbabwean Government to account for significant human rights violations, by raising these both publicly and privately with the Government and through the targeted designation of individuals under the UK's autonomous Zimbabwe sanctions regime. We shall also continue to support CSOs working to identify human rights violations and providing support to victims and human rights defenders.

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