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Fiona Bruce: We need to act together to help victims of acts of violence based on religion or belief

Fiona Bruce MP is the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Conservatism Home (22.08.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2ULSmzP> - Today marks the United Nation's International Day Commemorating Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief.

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion", states Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, committed to by the international community in 1948 following the Holocaust.

Sadly, however, acts of violence against people based on their religion or belief are by no means an issue of the past. Still today, in 2021, people around the world are subjected to such violence that will shape their lives for years to come.

Tragic events unfolding before our eyes in Afghanistan highlight this only too clearly. As the Foreign Secretary said in the House of Commons this week, "we must live up to the best traditions of this country in playing our part in offering safe haven to those Afghans who are now fleeing persecution from the Taliban."

Still today, close to 3,000 Yazidi women and children are missing after Daesh abducted them from Sinjar in August 2014. Many have been subjected to daily and unimaginable abuse for over seven years and there is no promise that this suffering will cease anytime soon. To this day, there are close to 10,000 Daesh fighters in Syria and Iraq waiting for the opportunity to strike again and attack the religious mosaic in both countries.

Still today, since 2017, over a million Uyghur Muslims and other minorities have been extra-judicially detained in "political re-education camps," prevented from praying and observing religious practices; facing systematic restrictions on their culture; their places of worship destroyed.

Still today, religious minority women and girls, including from Christian, Sikh and Hindu communities, are abducted in Pakistan, subjected to forced conversions and forced marriages. Some as young as 12 – forced to be adults before their time.

Still today, men and women accused of blasphemy are sentenced to death by courts or attacked by mobs taking 'justice' in their own hands.

Still today, perpetrators of brutal acts of violence based on religion or belief enjoy impunity; their crimes rarely investigated; prosecutions do not follow. This sends the

harrowing message that you can get away with your crimes, especially if you target religious or belief minorities.

There is much more the international community can do to address acts of violence based on religion or belief. As we mark today, we need to focus on joint action to help victims and survivors of such acts of violence, to hold perpetrators to account and to strengthen steps preventing such egregious acts of violence in the future.

Indeed, the Government has been actively working in this direction, in particular on our manifesto commitment to implement in full the Bishop of Truro's Review recommendations, which seek to ensure that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) comprehensively responds to persecution based on religion or belief globally.

Plainly the UK can't tackle this issue alone; to do so effectively requires international cooperation, as the Truro Review recommends. The Government is implementing these recommendations to ensure FCDO work is equipped to address the global challenges to freedom of religion or belief for all, and in its determination to be a force for good in the world.

The UK is also a founding member of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, a growing network of 33 countries fully committed to advancing freedom of religion or belief around the world. Together we identify areas for action and use our collective voice to highlight situations of concern of vulnerable communities – as we did recently, standing with people of all faiths and beliefs subjected to inhumane treatment in Myanmar.

The British Government has also engaged leaders of religion and belief to dismantle harmful misinterpretations of religious texts as part of its work to prevent and respond to sexual violence in conflict. A founding document, the Declaration of Humanity, launched November 2020, has united 50 faith and belief leaders, governments and NGOs around the world in a call to prevent sexual violence in conflict and denounce the stigma faced by survivors, including children born of rape.

This year, the UK is funding projects led by faith and belief leaders in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan that will enable communities affected by conflict-related sexual violence to develop action plans guided by the principles of the Declaration of Humanity.

However, we cannot assume that violent acts against people of faith occur only beyond our borders. In the past few days we have seen a "violent and unprovoked attack" at a cathedral in the UK, where a priest was hit with a glass bottle whilst he sat praying alone in a pew, and heard the shocking news of a woman, whilst speaking of her faith, being attacked with a knife at Speaker's Corner.

Leaders of religion and belief must play their role in countering narratives which aim to justify such violence whenever and wherever it occurs – indeed this is a job for us all. So let's mark this year's International Day of Commemoration with a fresh resolution to strive together to make acts of violence based on religion or belief truly something of the past.

Photo : Fiona Bruce MP – Conservative Home

Christian evangelist stabbed in London recovers from injuries

Hatun Tash is a Christian apologist who has been sharing the gospel with Muslims in the well-known Speaker's Corner of Hyde Park.

Evangelical Focus (26.07.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3l8gpnn> - Hatun Tash, a former Muslim who is now a Christian speaker sharing the gospel with Muslim background people, was stabbed in the Speaker's Corner, an area in [London's Hyde Park](#) where public debates are organised.

According to friends and colleagues of Christian ministry Hatun has worked with, the 39-year-old woman **"is fine and under medical attention"**.

The Christian woman was stabbed on her hand and face by **a young man wearing black**, who later fled the scene as some of the other 30 people there confronted him. The knife used in the attack was recovered.

According to UK newspaper *The Daily Mail*, Detective Superintendent Alex Bingley (Central West Command Unit), said: "This was clearly a very distressing incident for the woman involved and officers have spent time with her, whilst she was **being treated for her injury, to get an account of what happened**". He asked for members of the public who had video recordings of the attack to share them with the police. The Superintendent added that no arrests had been made yet.

A Christian apologist among Muslims

Hatun is known for debating Muslims and offering a Christian perspective that confronts Islam.

Social media video footage shows how even as she waits for an ambulance to arrive, Hatun speaks to Muslim citizens about the need to "repent". **"God does not need me"**, she says with blood on her face and arm. She had previously collapsed for some minutes. Hatun Tash leads [DCCI ministries](#), which "seeks to preach the Gospel to Muslims using apologetics and polemics (...) Our motivation is a **love for Muslims to bring them to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ** in order to attain eternal life".

She and has worked with several Christian ministries, both in the UK and outside, including Pfander, an organisation that "engages Islam through research, writing, film, informal and formal debates". According to Jay Smith, a friend of Tash and founder of Pfander, it is **not the first time she has been attacked with violence**. "We need to pray for her recovery", Smith [said](#) in a video published after the incident. "This will not detract her". He added: "Speaker's Corner should be a place where we can speak and we can criticise".

Hatun Tash has also been a speaker at the European Leadership Forum, an annual conference in Poland bringing together evangelical leaders from across Europe.

HRWF comment

The incident was either ignored by a number of mainline British media or focusing on the victim's wearing a Charlie Hebdo tee-shirt. It hereby gave the impression that it was the sole reason for the attack but they failed to mention the possibly religious dimension of the assault (See i.e. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-57965251>)

See the analysis of the media coverage of the incident on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0gTYtEc12Pg>

The victim is a 39-year-old ex-Muslim from Turkey who is now a prominent critic of Islam and believes Muslims should be encouraged to convert to Christianity.

She has had many heated discussions with Islamic preachers and others, and has previously been attacked for piercing holes through the Koran and waving a cartoon image of the Prophet Mohammed depicted as a crying baby.

In October 2020, Sadiq Khan was asked about Ms Tash at Mayor's Question Time and said police had escorted her out of Hyde Park 'for her own safety' after a large and hostile crowd had gathered around her. He added that 'freedom of speech is a principle that I hold dear', adding: 'One of the best things about London is the fierce way in which we protect this right and people's ability to exercise it.'

Photo : The Christian speaker Hatun Tash after being attacked on 25 July. / Video: Soco Films via Pfander films.

Convictions upheld for British pagans who trespassed at Stonehenge

Lawyers for Lisa Mead, Maryam Halcrow and Angel Grace argued the trio had a 'reasonable excuse' to enter a restricted area at the prehistoric monument, based on their religious beliefs.

By Emily McFarlan Miller

Religion News Service (11.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3bKyaEc> - Three British pagans have lost their High Court appeal to overturn their convictions for breaching protections at Stonehenge, the iconic stone monument aligned with the movements of the sun on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, England.

Lawyers for Lisa Mead, Maryam Halcrow and Angel Grace argued the trio had a "reasonable excuse" to enter a restricted area at the prehistoric monument, based on their religious beliefs.

Mead, a druid, has said she needs access to the stones to “charge her crystals to work in healing,” according to the Evening Standard. Halcrow, [described by the Swindon Advertiser](#) as a “solitary hedge witch,” reportedly told police she was there to “worship at her temple.”

Mead and Halcrow crossed a rope barrier and “no entry” sign to enter the stone circle on Feb. 4, 2018, [according to a report in the Evening Standard](#).

On a second occasion, Mead, Halcrow and Grace, who also identifies as a druid, unlawfully entered the circle on May 6, 2018.

They were convicted in November 2018, which they appealed, eventually reaching the High Court. Lawyers claimed the convictions infringed on their freedoms of religion, expression and lawful protest.

The Evening Standard reported that the High Court ruling Wednesday (March 10) acknowledged the women’s “religious beliefs in paganism, druidism and ‘light working.’” But, it said, unrestricted access to the site “would inevitably have an adverse effect on Stonehenge to the detriment of current and future generations.”

English Heritage, which oversees Stonehenge, [describes it as](#) “a wonder of the world, a spiritual place and a source of inspiration.”

During general admission hours, entry to Stonehenge is ticketed and the stone circle is off-limits. Visitors are not allowed to touch the stones.

The World Heritage Site also hosts “managed open access days” for the summer and winter solstice and autumnal and vernal equinox, and small groups can reserve access to the stone circle outside of general admission hours. Mead has objected to the “party mood” of open access days, and Grace to the “prohibitive” cost of reserving the site, according to the Swindon Advertiser.

Mead, Halcrow and Grace were given conditional discharges following their initial convictions, [according to the BBC](#).

APPG launches commentary on the current state of FoRB

APPG (01.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3qcO6TC> - The All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief has today published its latest **Commentary on the Current State of International Freedom of Religion or Belief** (FoRB). This coincides with the current meeting of the UN Human Rights Council – the Commentary is partly intended to inform UK policy on FoRB as articulated at the HRC.

There is a particular emphasis on the impact that the global pandemic has had on FoRB. The Foreword, written by three eminent authorities on FoRB, states “*The Commentary recalls the UN Secretary General’s observation that there has been a ‘tsunami of hate and xenophobia’. Religion and belief communities have been blamed for the virus; made scapegoat for the outbreaks; castigated as irresponsible ‘super-spreaders’; accused of being resistant to implement public health measures, of peddling ‘phoney’ remedies, of opposing vaccinations – etc, etc. Whilst freedom of conscience must of course be respected, many of these attacks, which have made some religion or belief groups the target of conspiracy theories and of hate speech have amounted to little more than self-serving attempts to deflect attention from the failure of the authorities in relation to these matters.*”

There is also a focus on the issue of gender and FoRB – *"This year in particular, in which the UN Special Rapporteur has placed a special focus on the impact of gender on the enjoyment of the freedom of religion or belief, it is shocking to note the extent to which issues concerning gender discriminations have once again risen to the fore. The longstanding impacts of gender-based discrimination continue to be damningly negative, exacerbating the dehumanisation, inequalities and violations which were already being suffered."*

In July 2020, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) published the 2019 Human Rights and Democracy Report. The report *"provided an assessment of the global human rights situation, and set out the UK Government's thematic, consular, and programme work to advance human rights throughout the world. It focused on 30 countries where we are particularly concerned about human rights issues, and where we consider that the UK can make a real difference."*

This APPG commentary is primarily intended to offer the staff at the newly-reorganised Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) the reliable, detailed, evidence-based monitoring and analysis of FoRB violations that is essential for formulating, implementing and evaluating realistic policies and actions to address FoRB and interlinked human rights violations. The Commentary includes 24 profiles of countries with significant FoRB violations.

The Commentary offers recommendations for action at the FCDO – including the proposals ***"That the FCDO continues to affirm FoRB as a priority concern within its human rights agenda, and ensures that it is actively recognised as a key dimension of COVID-19 pandemic responses, and maintains its focus on gender and sexual violence in conflict; that at a time of reorganisation, and serious budget cuts, the FCDO takes every care to maximise the potential opportunities of its reorganisation by mainstreaming FoRB considerations into its new processes at every level."***

Photo : unsplash.com

A step in the right direction for free speech on campus

ADF International (16.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3qHsG28> - Today, the Department for Education released a report titled "[Higher Education: Free Speech and Academic Freedom](#)", which recognises the harmful effects of censorship at UK universities, and lays out new proposals to tackle the problem.

ADF International, the human rights group which has been running [a nationwide campaign](#) calling for better speech protections on campus, welcomed the report as an encouraging development towards restoring a diverse and inclusive environment on UK campuses.

Ryan Christopher, Director of ADF International in the UK, said:

"We welcome the report issued today, which marks important progress towards the goal of protecting free speech at universities. Our recent polling highlights the importance of this issue. The report recommends the creation of a right of redress in law for students and individuals who have suffered the negative consequences of censorship in the academic sphere. The recognition of the harm caused by 'cancel-culture' will be meaningful to Julia Rynkiewicz, who we supported after she was suspended from her midwifery training at Nottingham University on account of her views. We hope that the

proposals will open up access to justice for other students who, like Julia, may fall victim to discriminatory measures.”

The publication of the report is timely. New polling commissioned by the Reclaim Party and published only days ago found that 50% of respondents believed that freedom of speech is under threat. This bolsters findings in the recent [ADF International poll](#) where 50% of students declared that they worried their peers would treat them differently if they expressed their true views about some issues important to them. Over a third were fearful to share their opinion, should it adversely impact their future careers.

The report solidifies the recent announcement that a “Free Speech Champion” will be created with powers to defend free speech and academic freedom in universities. This ‘Champion’ will be able to directly penalise colleges or student bodies which attempt to entrench cancel-culture, based on new statutory powers given to the student regulator, the Office for Students. The newly announced proposals taken together represent an important step towards tackling the cancel-culture that has limited free expression and robust academic debate in recent years.

“These announcements are timely and come as positive developments – but more must be done, particularly to ensure that university staff receive the training that they need to recognise and uphold the free speech of students and foster an inclusive and diverse learning environment. While we welcome the proposals, we will continue to advocate for these better protections to be put into practice in order to achieve the [change promised](#) by education secretary Gavin Williamson when he identified the problem in 2020,” continued Christopher.

Attacks on Christians: UK MPs seek sanctions against Nigeria

By Clifford Ndujihe

Vanguard (07.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3bnH3DV> - Some members of United Kingdom House of Lords have asked the UK to take more action against Nigeria to check the rising killings of Christians by terrorists and state actors in parts of the West African country.

In a letter to Dominic Raab, MP, UK’s Foreign Secretary, House of Commons, London, they lamented that the attacks led by Islamist militia continue in northern states and the Middle Belt, with almost-daily reports of killings, mayhem, rape and sexual abuse, abductions and enslavement, mass forced displacement and land-grabs.

The key signatories to the letter are David Patrick Paul Alton, the Lord Alton of Liverpool, a Liberal Democratic member of UK Parliament; Caroline Annex Cox, a cross-bench member of the UK House of Lords; and Sam Mason. They are also prominent members of the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Belief as well as key members of Jubilee Campaign International, an Int’l anti-religious persecution campaign group featuring prominent world religious and political leaders including former Nigeria President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo and past Archbishops of Canterbury UK All-Party Parliamentary Group For International Freedom of Religion or Belief.

They said: “We write following the publication of a new report by Nigerian human rights group, Intersociety (December 14, 2020), which raises serious concerns about the scale of human rights abuses in Nigeria and the need for an urgent response.

"Attacks led by Islamist militia continue in northern states and the Middle Belt, with almost-daily reports of killings, mayhem, rape and sexual abuse, abductions and enslavement, mass forced displacement and land-grabs. According to Intersociety, an estimated 34,400 Christians have been killed in Nigeria since 2009 – including 17,000 by Boko Haram (and its splinter groups) and 15,500 by Fulani militia.

"Reports consistently showed that in Nigeria, month after month, on average of hundreds of Christians were being killed for reasons connected with their faith. Those worst affected included Christian women and girls abducted, and forced to convert, enter forced marriages, sexual abuse and torture," they said.

"The same concerns were raised in two other recent reports: 'Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?' by the APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief; and 'Nigeria's Silent Slaughter: Genocide in Nigeria and the Implications for the International Community,' by the International Committee on Nigeria and the International Organisation on Peace-building and Social Justice.

"The ICC's decade-long preliminary investigation (which concluded December 11, 2020) found that Nigerian security forces have committed crimes against humanity and war crimes, including: murder, rape, torture, and cruel treatment; enforced disappearance; forcible transfer of population; outrages upon personal dignity; intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population as such and against individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities; unlawful imprisonment; conscripting and enlisting children under the age of fifteen years into armed forces and using them to participate actively in hostilities; persecution on gender and political grounds; and other inhumane acts.

The ICC confirmed that domestic courts have not responded to atrocities adequately or at all and that the Nigerian government has failed in its obligations to hold those responsible to account. However, the Office of the Prosecutor faces serious resource constraints to investigating and prosecuting new situations and cases. We therefore urge HMG, as a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, to ensure any investigation is adequately resourced."

Intersociety reports that 1,400 Christians have been killed by the Nigerian army, police and air force. Nigerian army's former Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General Theophilus Danjuma says the armed forces are "not neutral, they collude" in the "ethnic cleansing in riverine states" by Fulani herders. He insists that villagers must defend themselves because "depending on the armed forces" will result in them dying "one by one. The ethnic cleansing must stop."

Commending the decision by the US State Department to designate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern because of FoRB violations and its recognition of escalating "religious-tinged violence," the MPs said "the lack of comparable response by the UK is both stark and alarming. If HMG continue to ignore or downplay the strong religious factor fuelling the conflict, as identified by the US State Department, resources will be wasted on the implementation of solutions based on a premise that has little-to-no impact on the violence."

UK government's response

Over £2 billion of UK bilateral aid was given to Nigeria between 2011 and 2018, an equivalent of £800,000 every day. However, we share growing concerns over how the funds are spent; and how it could be better spent – especially in relation to the protection of those most at risk of attack and the need to bring perpetrators to justice.

The UK is also one of the largest donors to the World Food Programme's emergency operation in North-east Nigeria, but it does not currently provide humanitarian assistance in the Middle Belt states, despite this being one of the worst-affected regions.

"For the UK merely to "emphasize the importance of mediation and inter-faith dialogue" trivialises the scale of persecution of Christians. It is too simplistic for the UK Government to label atrocities committed by Fulani militia as driven by desertification, climate change or competition for resources. Protracted attempts to address these (albeit important) longer-term factors will not stop the current rate of killings."
