

## SHDM SIDE EVENT

ENGLISH only

### Strategies for Supporting Human Rights Defenders

#### Introductory speech by Susan Hyland, Head of the Human Rights

#### Policy Department in the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office.

NOT AS DELIVERED

##### What I'm here to say

I'm not going to talk long as I'm keen to allow as much as time as possible for discussion but I'd quickly like to touch upon the following 3 subjects:

- the importance of Human rights defenders
- how the UK Government works with, and supports, Human rights defenders
- and finally OSCE activity in this field

##### Importance of Human rights defenders

Human rights defenders play an invaluable role in society. They work under often very difficult - sometimes even dangerous - conditions, to defend civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, at the local, national and international level.

I have witnessed first hand their inspiring work and I'm proud to be sharing a panel with them today.

It is easy to promote human rights from the safety of a western capital or diplomatic meeting room. But it is a very different matter to be on the ground yourself, defending your own home and livelihood and, perhaps, risking your life for the sake of others. If I were to ask myself "could I do that". I'd like to think the answer would be yes but I'm not sure it would. Your courage is an example to us all.

We owe it to all of you to speak out about the human rights abuses you protest against; to be quicker to come to your aid when you yourselves are targeted and harassed; and to remonstrate with the governments that repress you.

##### Domestic Policy

As a government we share that common responsibility of all States to ensure adequate remedy of human rights concerns of the people in our country. We can never be perfect, but pride in our domestic record reinforces our advocacy with other States.

Since 2002, successive Ministers for Human Rights in the Ministry of Justice have had regular meetings – usually three or four times a year – with the principal organisations concerned with promotion and protection of human rights in the UK. Discussions have been about implementation and development human of rights policy. Recent discussions have focused on progress towards the establishment of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights in October 2007; the scope of the Human Rights Act;

and the Government's campaign to increase public understanding and awareness of human rights.

These meetings are informal and focus on issues of current interest. The meetings provide a channel of political communication between NGOs and Ministers and a sounding board for Ministers to test out and develop new ideas.

Membership is not exclusive. Organisations, and individuals prominent in the field of human rights, attend meetings according to need rather than by routine.

### Foreign Policy

Abroad, support for individual human rights defenders is also a fundamental part of UK foreign policy. We recognise that individual abuses are a symptom of wider problems; and the treatment of individuals a strong indicator of where progress is – or is not – being made. So wherever possible the foreign office and overseas missions raise individual cases of concern with governments and will continue to do so.

Let me tell you about some of the things the British Government does:

- We have a designated focal point in our Human Rights Department in the Foreign Office in London to co-ordinate activity
- We provide training for our staff overseas on what action they can take before they go to work in British Embassies around the world.
  - Leading human rights academics, lawyers and NGOs are among the speakers on our training courses.
- We ask our Embassies to implement the EU Guidelines on Human rights defenders. This requires them to engage with local activists, support their work and raise concerns on their behalf with the host government when the situation so justifies.
- This includes encouraging our Embassies to undertake field visits to consult with Human rights defenders outside capitals e.g. last month staff from our Embassy in Hanoi took part in a EU Field Mission to review the human rights situation in remote provinces of Vietnam. Meetings with Human rights defenders formed an integral part of this trip.
- We arrange meetings with local defenders when officials and Ministers travel abroad. For example, five FCO Ministers, including our former Foreign Minister, met with Russian NGOs last year, in the UK and in Russia. Ministers raised concerns discussed with the Russian authorities.
- We raise individual cases of concern in our human rights dialogues with other countries. The issue of human rights defenders is prominently raised during EU HR dialogue meetings with China and Uzbekistan as well as in the EU HR consultations with Russia. Extensive consultation with local human rights defenders takes place before the official/dialogue consultation meetings.
- We arrange for relevant human rights NGOs to brief our Ministers in advance of key international meetings such as the UN Human Rights Council

- We support the work of UN Special Rapporteur for Human rights defenders by maintaining a standing invitation for country visits and responding to all communications

### OSCE activity

We see the OSCE as a vital organisation through which to progress action on human rights defenders. The UK was instrumental in encouraging the establishment within the OSCE ODIHR of a focal point on Human Rights Defenders and National Human Rights Institutions - a response to the continued difficulties faced by Human rights defenders in a number of OSCE participating States. The title of the focal point illustrates well the dual character of the work required in this area. On one hand working to support, protect and equip human rights defenders, and on the other working with governments to encourage an appreciation for the positive role that these actors can play, and to put in place a framework for protecting their rights of free speech and free association and remedying human rights abuses. In our view the ODIHR is well positioned to contribute positively in both respects. It is an institution co-owned by participating States, with good coverage through the field missions of the OSCE region, and longstanding support to, and inclusion of, civil society in its activities.

The focal point will also be able to draw on the broad range of assistance that the ODIHR has developed for participating States. One relevant example would be ODIHR's excellent Guidelines on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly, which I would recommend to all participating States. Similar guidelines on Freedom of Association are keenly anticipated and will usefully deal with some key questions around NGO status.

Although the main obstacle to change is often a lack of political will and the need for mindsets to be changed, lack of professional capacity can also be a problem. Here we strongly support the ODIHR's work to equip NHRI personnel and Human rights defenders alike with the necessary skills and capacity required to develop frameworks ensuring the promotion and protection of human rights to come to fruition.

I'm delighted to inform you that a resolution on Human rights defenders tabled by the UK delegation to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly was adopted at the Parliamentary Assembly's summer session in Kiev last week. I think this shows that the priority the UK government attaches to bettering the situation of Human rights defenders is also felt keenly by our parliamentarians.

More broadly I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the UK's strong support for the participation of civil society organisations in OSCE meetings. This practice acts in support of the principles we are discussing here today of open consultation and engagement between officials and citizens. It is also an essential means of ensuring that citizens are aware of the activities of the OSCE.

## Conclusion

Human rights defenders make a vital contribution to the promotion of human rights internationally. With no country enjoying the luxury of a perfect human rights record, scrutiny from civil society is key in holding governments to account. Whilst we may not always share the same perspective, we should always understand each other's position

I am interested to hear examples from those present of good practice, the challenges in these areas and what we can do better.

Thank you.