

OSCE HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING 2019

UNITED KINGDOM STATEMENT ON FREEDOM OF THOUGHT, CONSCIENCE, RELIGION OR BELIEF

Promoting and defending human rights, including Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, is a priority for the United Kingdom.

Over the past year, the United Kingdom has stepped up our work, focusing not only on combatting intolerance, but also, crucially, on promoting respect and understanding between communities. On 12 September 2019, Mr Rehman Chishti MP succeeded Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon as the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, and Mr Chishti will now lead the UK's efforts on this fundamental freedom.

The UK has spoken up for the rights of religious minorities across the world, including the over one million Uyghurs detained in so-called "re-education camps" in China, Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and the Baha'i in Iran and Yemen. We have also worked multilaterally with our partners and friends to defend Freedom of Religion or Belief. This includes co-sponsoring the Polish-led UN Resolution creating a new International Day to commemorate the victims of acts of violence based on religion or belief, as well as co-sponsoring an informal UN Security Council meeting in New York on advancing the safety and security of persons belonging to religious minorities in armed conflict.

Working closely with faith and belief leaders has remained a key part of our work. Former Special Envoy Lord Ahmad met the Archbishop of Canterbury; the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom; the Grand Mufti Shawki Allam of Egypt; and many others to hear their concerns about freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. The UK also works very closely with individuals and leaders of no religion or belief, such as Humanists and atheists, whose safety is under threat in many parts of the world. Special Envoy Rehman Chishti will continue this work, to promote religious freedom and champion the cause of those being persecuted for their faith or belief.

In December last year, the former Foreign Secretary announced that he had commissioned an independent review on the support that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office provides to persecuted Christians globally. The final report of the independent review presented a series of recommendations on measures the UK can take to support persecuted Christians overseas.

The UK Government accepted all of the recommendations, and work has begun to implement them. We hope that the review will inspire other governments, including those with strong track records on human rights, to look at what else they can do to help some of the most vulnerable people around the world.

Our commitment to Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, including the right to change or leave your religion, is unwavering, and we look forward to continuing our work to defend this human right, in line with our OSCE commitments.