

We will try to defend human dignity wherever it is threatened: statement by UK Minister for Human Rights

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Statement by Chris Elmore MP, Minister for Multilateral, Human Rights, Latin America and the Caribbean, at the UN Human Rights Council High-Level Week.

Mr Vice President,

When the United Kingdom asked the world to place its trust in us and return us to this Council, we made a clear promise – that we would use our seat to defend human dignity wherever it is threatened.

Today, standing here as a member once again, I want to renew that promise, plainly, openly and with conviction. Because at its heart, this Council is about people, their lives, their freedoms, their safety. And in too many places, those basic rights are being torn away.

Four years have passed since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Four years in which ordinary people have endured airstrikes, unlawful detentions, torture, executions. Last year alone, nearly 15,000 civilians were killed as Russia intensified its attacks.

We are also seeing immense suffering in Gaza, with families living through a humanitarian crisis that deepens day by day. That is why aid must get in, and why civilians must be protected. And to turn that urgency into lasting change, including in the West Bank, the 20 Point Plan must now move swiftly to its next phase, so we can begin building the foundations for a two-state solution.

In Iran, thousands of families continue to grieve for loved ones killed during protests. Others search for answers about relatives who remain in prison, or have simply disappeared.

When this Council came together in a Special Session last month, it showed what the UN can achieve when we act with urgency and purpose. And that is something we must strengthen as we look ahead to the UN80 agenda.

The human rights system we shape for the next generation must be one that adds value where no one else can, and one that delivers impact where the need is greatest. It must be able to investigate the worst abuses, to hold perpetrators to account, and to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves.

Nowhere is that more urgently needed than in Sudan and South Sudan. In Sudan, millions have been displaced. Civilians have been targeted. Communities have been shattered.

The Fact-Finding Mission on Sudan remains key to ensuring the truth is documented. The findings of its report on El Fasher last week were truly horrific. Atrocities including systematic starvation, torture, killings, rape and deliberate ethnic targeting used on the most horrendous scale.

As the Foreign Secretary said in her statement at the UN Security Council on Thursday, these crimes must not go unanswered. There must be accountability.

In South Sudan, too many communities are trapped between escalating clashes, sexual violence, forced recruitment, and the crushing of political freedoms. Actions that undermine the Revitalised Agreement and distort governance structures are worsening the crisis.

The Commission on Human Rights is indispensable – exposing abuses, preserving evidence and pressing for accountability, so South Sudan’s people are neither forgotten nor abandoned to impunity.

But alongside these crises, there are moments of hope. In Syria, we have seen commitments from the Syrian Government that offer the possibility of a more inclusive future. Those steps must continue, and they must lead to a transition that reflects the aspirations of all Syrians.

And throughout all these struggles across conflict zones, courtrooms, remote villages and crowded cities, one group stands at the front line – human rights defenders. These are ordinary people doing extraordinary things, often at great personal risk.

The world is becoming more dangerous for them. And we cannot allow that to continue. That is why the United Kingdom is committing £2.5 million to the Lighthouse Fund to support and protect those brave individuals.

Mr Vice President,

We return to this Council humbled by the responsibility and energised by the work ahead. We will listen. We will act. And we will stand with everyone who believes, as we do, that human rights are universal, and defending them is the surest way to build a safer, fairer world.

Thank you.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/we-will-try-to-defend-human-dignity-wherever-it-is-threatened-statement-by-uk-minister-for-human-rights>