

## **Written evidence from Catholic Bishops Conference and Church of England (FRB0007)**

### **Joint Submission by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales and the Church of England to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee Inquiry into Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)**

#### **Executive summary**

- We welcome this inquiry and the opportunity to contribute; it is our hope that the Foreign Affairs Select Committee will continue to regularly scrutinise the UK's promotion and protection of FoRB.
- Our approach to this issue is shaped by four overarching principles:
  - FoRB is a fundamental human right for people of all faiths and none;
  - FoRB should have parity with other human rights;
  - The UK government should take a cross-departmental approach to promoting and protecting FoRB;
  - Understanding of FoRB issues should be informed by the voices of those directly affected.
- In addition, we would like to highlight the following specific recommendations:
  - The FCO's FoRB Toolkit should be actively used by all diplomatic posts and this use should be routinely monitored;
  - The Prime Minister's Special Envoy on FoRB should be a dedicated post, not combined with other roles;
  - The FCO should set a clear target to increase the amount spent on FoRB initiatives;
  - The FCO should implement a strategy to improve FoRB training and religious literacy;
  - The FCO should implement a strategy to improve contact with faith groups overseas;
  - These practical steps should be a priority for the UK government, rather than creating new definitions of persecution;
  - The FCO should set out clearly how it intends to take forward the recommendations of the Independent Review of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians.

## About

1. This submission is produced by the Catholic Bishops' Conference International Affairs Department and the Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Council.<sup>1</sup> Promoting and protecting FoRB is a priority area of work for both offices, particularly given the worsening situation in many parts of the world.
2. Our work is primarily informed by direct contact with Catholic and Anglican communities in areas where FoRB is under threat, including through regular visits and hosting representatives in the UK. These communities are an integral part of our global churches.
3. We regularly raise matters of critical importance concerning FoRB violations with FCO ministers, as well as diplomatic staff in both Whitehall and overseas posts. We also engage with several foreign embassies in the UK.
4. This joint submission builds on a background of collaboration between our churches in areas such as the Independent Review of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians<sup>2</sup> and the Holy Land Coordination.<sup>3</sup>

## Overarching principles

5. **FoRB is a fundamental human right for people of all faiths and none.** As Cardinal Nichols and Archbishop Welby stated in their letter to the Independent Review of FCO Support for Persecuted of Christians: "threats to freedom of religion or belief are not restricted to Christians alone. Rather, it is a widespread experience of the followers of other faiths. Many are deprived of this basic expression of their human dignity. Similar threats are also faced by atheists and agnostics who seek to uphold crucial decisions of conscience."<sup>4</sup>
6. While our engagement on this issue is primarily informed by the experience of our Christian sisters and brothers in other parts of the world, it is the position of both

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<sup>1</sup> The Mission and Public Affairs Council is the body responsible for overseeing research and comment on social and political issues on behalf of the Church. The Council comprises a representative group of bishops, clergy and lay people with interests and expertise in the relevant areas, and reports to the General Synod through the Archbishops' Council

<sup>2</sup> *Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales and Church of England Submission to Independent Review of FCO support for persecuted Christians 2019*

([bishopsconference.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2019/07/cbcew-and-coe-submission.pdf](https://bishopsconference.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2019/07/cbcew-and-coe-submission.pdf))

<sup>3</sup> The Holy Land Coordination is an annual delegation of Catholic and Anglican Bishops to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (see: [theholylan.org.uk](https://theholylan.org.uk))

<sup>4</sup> *Cardinal Vincent Nichols and Archbishop Justin Welby letter to the Independent Review of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians 16/4/19* ([bishopsconference.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2019/07/cover-letter-from-cardinal-nichols-and-archbishop-welby.pdf](https://bishopsconference.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2019/07/cover-letter-from-cardinal-nichols-and-archbishop-welby.pdf))

our churches that the FCO should prioritise the most serious violations of FoRB rather than any specific community.<sup>5</sup>

7. We were encouraged therefore that despite the initial terms of reference for the Independent Review of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians, the final report grounded its analysis and recommendations in a human rights framework and in a way that will benefit all those that face the risks or reality of restriction, hostility or death, either on an individual or communal basis, because of the beliefs they hold or as a result of their religious identities.
8. **FoRB should have parity with other human rights.** Too often the impression is given by the FCO that FoRB is a secondary human right and that limited departmental resources should be directed elsewhere. We hope to see a broader reconfiguration of how this issue is approached, not only as a fundamental human right in itself but also as an important barometer of human rights, peace and stability more broadly.
9. However, FoRB should not be prioritised above other human rights. Indeed, some of the biggest challenges facing religious minority communities across the world are more appropriately viewed through a wider human rights prism rather than specifically as FoRB issues; for example, the impact of occupation on Christian communities in Palestine<sup>6</sup> or the impact of civil war on Christian communities in Northern Myanmar.<sup>7</sup>
10. **The UK government should take a cross-departmental approach to promoting and protecting FoRB.** Some of the most critical challenges facing communities that have experienced FoRB violations relate to poverty or economic hardship, necessitating the involvement of DFID. For example, Daesh's destruction of Christian and Yazidi towns in Northern Iraq means that even after the immediate physical threat has subsided, whole communities have been left without homes, basic facilities or livelihoods, threatening their future in the country.<sup>8</sup>
11. Trade negotiations also present an important opportunity for promoting FoRB in countries that the UK has an economic relationship with, particularly as DIT has

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<sup>5</sup> See for example: Church of England Synod debate on *Violence against Religious Minorities in Iraq and Syria* 2014 ([churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/General%20Synod%2017-18%20November%202014%20FULL%20FINAL.pdf](http://churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/General%20Synod%2017-18%20November%202014%20FULL%20FINAL.pdf)); and Bishop Declan Lang, *Stand up against the persecution of Atheists around the world* 2016 ([catholicnews.org.uk/Home/News/2016/January-March/Persecution-of-Atheists](http://catholicnews.org.uk/Home/News/2016/January-March/Persecution-of-Atheists))

<sup>6</sup> See: Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land, *The question of normalisation* 14/5/17 ([lpj.org/commission-justice-and-peace-question-of-normalization/](http://lpj.org/commission-justice-and-peace-question-of-normalization/))

<sup>7</sup> See: Vatican News, *Myanmar Bishops call for peace and justice in war torn Kachin state* 3/5/18 ([vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2018-05/myanmar-bishop-kachin-conflict-peace-justice.html](http://vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2018-05/myanmar-bishop-kachin-conflict-peace-justice.html))

<sup>8</sup> See interviews with Archbishop Nizar Seeman ([soundcloud.com/catholicchurch/new-archbishop-of-mosul-on-the-future-of-christianity-in-iraq](https://soundcloud.com/catholicchurch/new-archbishop-of-mosul-on-the-future-of-christianity-in-iraq)) and Bishop Paul McAleenan ([soundcloud.com/catholicchurch/bishop-visits-northern-iraq-two-years-after-daesh](https://soundcloud.com/catholicchurch/bishop-visits-northern-iraq-two-years-after-daesh))

established offices in fifteen countries about which the FCO explicitly raised concerns regarding FoRB in its most recent *Human Rights and Democracy Report*.<sup>9</sup>

12. Likewise, DIT invited seven of these countries to the 2019 Defence and Security Equipment International arms fair in London.<sup>10</sup> As Archbishop Kevin McDonald stated at the recent meeting of faith leaders with the US Secretary of State and former Foreign Secretary, hosted by Archbishop Justin Welby: “A concern for religious freedom should not be seen in isolation. It needs to inform policy across government, particularly on aid and the sale of arms to other countries.”<sup>11</sup>
13. In view of this it was disappointing that the terms of reference for the Independent Review of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians were limited to the FCO rather than including other Whitehall departments and bodies. The Government's work on FoRB should not be seen as an isolated strand of diplomatic activity but incorporated into aid, trade, resettlement, asylum and security policy.
14. While we understand that the Independent Review was commissioned by the former Foreign Secretary, it was surprising given the existing joint ministerial positions involving DFID and the FCO, and considering the prevailing Fusion Doctrine across Whitehall, that a more collaborative inter-departmental approach was not taken.
15. **Understanding of FoRB issues should be informed by the voices of those directly affected.** The FCO should significantly increase its engagement with faith groups (and where relevant representatives of people with no faith) in areas where FoRB violations are taking place, as well as with faith groups in the UK who have extensive contact with other parts of their communities across the world. FoRB issues vary significantly from country to country and it is only by listening to people's experiences that the complex nuances of each situation can be properly understood. For example, organisations such as the Pakistan Catholic Bishops' Conference National Justice and Peace Commission, produce detailed reports on country-specific issues relating to FoRB which can form a valuable starting point for engagement.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The FCO *Human Rights and Democracy Report 2018* cited FoRB concerns about Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka and Tunisia – all of which have DIT offices

<sup>10</sup> Algeria, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia received official invitations from DIT to the DSEI 2019 ([gov.uk/government/news/dsei-2019-countries-territories-and-organisations-invited-by-dit-dso-to-attend](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dsei-2019-countries-territories-and-organisations-invited-by-dit-dso-to-attend))

<sup>11</sup> *Archbishop McDonald challenges UK and US government on freedom of religion* 8/5/19 ([cbcew.org.uk/archbishop-mcdonald-challenges-uk-and-us-government-on-freedom-of-religion](https://www.cbcew.org.uk/archbishop-mcdonald-challenges-uk-and-us-government-on-freedom-of-religion))

<sup>12</sup> For example, the Pakistan Catholic Bishops' Conference National Justice and Peace Commission report *Human Rights Monitor 2018: a report on the religious minorities in Pakistan* which provides detailed analysis and cases studies in areas including social discrimination, crimes against women, and blasphemy laws ([forum-asia.org/uploads/wp/2018/08/Religious-Minority-in-Pakistan.pdf](https://forum-asia.org/uploads/wp/2018/08/Religious-Minority-in-Pakistan.pdf))

## Specific recommendations

16. **The FCO's Freedom of Religion or Belief Toolkit should be actively used by all diplomatic posts and this use should be routinely monitored.** The toolkit is a valuable resource, and the government should be congratulated for commissioning it, but it is evident from our interactions with embassy staff that there is either a lack of awareness that the toolkit exists or a reluctance to operationalise it.
17. We were encouraged when concerns raised by the Church of England with the Head of the Human Rights and Democracy Department in 2017 were taken forward, leading to the FCO Minister for Human Rights writing to all embassies commending the toolkit. This was a welcome step and underlines that relevant ministers are receptive to change, but the incident also demonstrates a lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation of how core guidelines produced in London are taken up by diplomatic posts around the world.
18. Unfortunately, our interactions with embassy staff since this communication suggest that little has changed. This was reflected by the Independent Review of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians, which found in the majority of diplomatic posts surveyed the toolkit had not been operationalised and in some there was still no awareness of its existence.<sup>13</sup>
19. **The Prime Minister's Special Envoy on FoRB should be a dedicated post, not combined with other roles.** Both our churches, including representatives from Catholic and Anglican communities in countries where FoRB is under threat, have enjoyed positive engagement with the Special Envoy and we are pleased that this post is being maintained under the new government. This is an important position which the current postholder has used to raise the profile of FoRB across Whitehall and with other governments both bilaterally and multilaterally.
20. However, while recognising the need for efficiency across government we do not believe that the responsibilities associated with this post can be adequately fulfilled when the incumbent is also the Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict and the Minister of State for the Commonwealth and the UN. Combining these roles is too much for any one individual.
21. The appointment of an Ambassador at Large for Human Rights, with a specific responsibility for taking forward work around PSVI, modern slavery, media freedom and FoRB, is a welcome development and should, if structured properly, be a valuable resource to the relevant minister and the FCO more broadly. Except for FoRB, these are all areas where the FCO is undertaking focused campaigns to secure specific policy objectives. The decision to include FoRB within this matrix gives encouragement that the FCO will launch a similar styled 'campaign' on FoRB. This

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<sup>13</sup> Independent Review of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians *final report* (2019) p.112

would be a welcome decision and one that would in principle, have the support of both our churches.

**22. The FCO should set a clear target to increase the amount spent on FoRB initiatives.**

It is welcome that FoRB has been included as a thematic area of interest in the invitation of bids for the Magna Carta fund; however, in 2017/18 just 7.2% of the fund was spent on projects in this area, which appears disproportionately low given the severity of the issue.<sup>14</sup>

23. While we understand the allocation of funds will always be determined to a great extent by applications received, proactively aiming to increase the amount spent on FoRB initiatives would give weight to the FCO's commitments and have a very practical impact in supporting those facing violations. We recognise that the FCO has recently allocated £201,401 of the Magna Carta Fund to research into FoRB issues<sup>15</sup> and hope this will help to establish a continued increase of funding for projects to protect and promote FoRB.

24. More could also be done in way of outreach training and support to encourage applications from organisations that have expertise in this area but might not have been grant beneficiaries in the past. Lessons can be learnt here from the way that the DFID managed its Aid Connect process and the emphasis given to encouraging consortium bids involving unusual coalitions drawn from a range of disciplines and backgrounds.

**25. The FCO should implement a strategy to improve FoRB training and religious literacy.** The existing training module on FoRB is voluntary rather than mandatory, meaning it may not reach those who need it most. If the FCO is serious in its commitment to FoRB, then training should be included as one of the faculties provided by the Diplomatic Academy and linked to career progression. We also recommend including a session on FoRB in the annual Heads of Mission Leadership Conference, involving experts in the field.

26. Likewise, further attention should be given to improving the religious literacy of ministers, ambassadors and diplomats. Any decisions or advocacy affecting faith communities must be informed by a strong comprehension of different traditions, sensitivities and historical contexts. Training about local faith communities should be given in advance of postings (possibly alongside language training).<sup>16</sup> This is not a

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<sup>14</sup> Hansard HL6121 (2017)

<sup>15</sup> FCO: John Bunyan Fund for Religious Freedom ([gov.uk/government/publications/john-bunyan-fund-for-freedom-of-religion-and-belief-call-for-bids](http://gov.uk/government/publications/john-bunyan-fund-for-freedom-of-religion-and-belief-call-for-bids))

<sup>16</sup> To give an example of the complexity and nuances involved – the Middle East Council of Churches publication *Christianity: a history in the Middle East* described as “crucial to understanding the culture of the Christian citizen of the Middle East region” runs to over 900 pages covering topics including ecumenism, citizenship, relations with Muslim majorities and differences between denominations

matter of pressing for a religiously orientated foreign policy, but rather with equipping diplomats and ministers with the requisite skills necessary to do their jobs proficiently.

27. Lessons can be learnt here from the US model, where the Department of State's Foreign Services Institute working closely with the Office of International Religious Freedom offers specialised courses on *Promoting Human Rights and Democracy*, which features specific modules on religious freedom, as well as on *Religion and Foreign Policy*. Two to three-day seminars are also offered on *Regional Religious Freedom*, while a distance learning course entitled *Religion and Conflict* is offered to help staff better assess religion-relevant dynamics in conflict and better engage religious leaders and communities in conflict mitigation efforts.
28. The Foreign Services Institute also offers a course for embassy staff and those in the Department who draft, edit and clear the State Department's annual *Human Rights Report* and the *International Religious Freedom Report*. A similar course might help to give greater depth to the FCO's annual *Human Rights and Democracy Report* and in so doing correct the unevenness of analysis and imbalances between human rights concerns addressed.
29. **The FCO should implement a strategy to improve contact with faith groups.**<sup>17</sup>

There is no substitute for direct contact with representatives of faith groups. Regular meetings should be mandatory for diplomatic posts and included in ministerial visits. In some circumstances this can also send a helpful signal to the country's government and others that the welfare of religious minorities is receiving international attention.
30. There is currently no centralised recording of such engagement, which could help to identify limitations in communication with different communities. The US *International Religious Freedom Report* lists representatives of faith groups that each diplomatic post has met over the preceding year, with varying degrees of detail to account for sensitivity and security. Adopting a similar system may facilitate better scrutiny of country-level activity and strengthen the UK's work in this area.
31. Likewise, ministers along with ambassadors in parts of the world where FoRB is under threat, should be encouraged to engage with the respective faith communities here in the UK. Our Churches and other faith groups are part of global networks giving us unique access, contact and understanding of the challenges faced by communities across the world, but this is often not considered by the FCO, resulting in missed opportunities.

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<sup>17</sup> and where relevant representatives of people with no faith

32. **These practical steps should be a priority for the UK government, rather than creating new definitions of persecution.** We disagree with recommendation three of the Independent Review of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians to “name the phenomenon of Christian discrimination and persecution.”<sup>18</sup>
33. While there is no doubt that in many places, our Christian sisters and brothers face persecution of an intensity and extent unprecedented in many centuries, creating a definition of ‘Christophobia’ risks both oversimplifying the complex local challenges that vary between different countries and diverting efforts from developing meaningful human rights protections.
34. Furthermore, this kind of language can inadvertently deepen divisions and create resentment between communities, thereby endangering the very people it is intended to protect. There is nothing to be gained and everything to be lost by encouraging competition for ‘victim status’.
35. **The FCO should set out clearly how it intends to take forward the recommendations of the Independent Review of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians.** It would be helpful to have clarity on this issue given the widespread changes across government and the differing responses made by ministers to questions and debates on this issue in both Houses.
36. The final report confirmed what we already knew - namely that Christians are under severe pressure in many parts of the world. Furthermore, the recommendations echo those that many NGOs, and in some cases our churches, have long been advocating for. However the very commissioning of this review has raised expectations that the Government is committed to strengthening its response to the very high levels of restrictions on FoRB that we have seen in recent years.

September 2019

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<sup>18</sup> Independent Review of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians *final report* (2019) p.130