



STATEMENT BY

**THE RIGHT HONOURABLE
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**MINISTER FOR AFRICA, ASIA AND
THE UNITED NATIONS**

**UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN
IRELAND**

**AT THE TENTH SESSION OF THE
UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL**

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Mr President, Madam High Commissioner,

When we ran for re-election to the Human Rights Council in 2008 the UK pledged its commitment to this body, and to working with all UN members to see it become the most effective body possible for the promotion and protection of all human rights.

My government stands by that commitment, and has always taken its human rights responsibilities seriously. International action can make a difference and we want to see this Council address the needs of victims, everywhere, whose rights are violated.

Mr President,

Ahead of the review by the General Assembly in 2011, I feel the Council could pursue progress in two areas in particular: first, the Council must address violations wherever they occur; and second the Council should enable an open and honest dialogue on contemporary human rights challenges.

The Council's attention to the situation in Eastern DRC was a good example of the prompt consideration that is required when a serious deterioration in respect for human rights takes place. The Council expressed concern at the situation in North Kivu calling for an immediate end to human rights abuses, in particular sexual violence and the recruitment by the militias of child soldiers. I welcome the launch today of the UN strategy against sexual violence in DRC.

In readiness to support Council consideration of human rights violations wherever they occur, we were ready too to consider the impact of the

Gaza conflict this January on the human rights of individuals on both sides. A consensus resolution appeared possible at one point, and would have given the Council's message added credibility.

But, other serious country situations have escaped Council consideration:

- Grave violations continue unchecked in Zimbabwe.
- Iran has continued the shameful practice of juvenile executions. It has harassed human rights defenders and clamped down rigidly on dissent and organised protest. Persecution of religious and ethnic minorities continues, and the government shows ongoing disrespect for its human rights obligations.

The Council should be able to offer these countries support, and must examine how they have escaped its attention.

I would like to offer my condolences to all affected by the terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Pakistan yesterday. We recognise the impact that terrorism and conflict has had on the people of Sri Lanka. I believe that the Council should address the situation in Sri Lanka, where ongoing military hostilities make the need to improve the human rights situation even more urgent.

The inspiration for the Council was, for many, to move beyond some of the divisions that marked debate in the past. Council members have shown mixed willingness to look afresh at issues. There is a pressing need to put aside geopolitics and work across the membership for shared understanding of how to address modern human rights challenges.

The concept of defamation of religions has surfaced in the Durban process, the General Assembly and this Council. I believe that the long established international framework strikes the right balance between freedom of expression and the need to protect individuals from those who incite hatred or violence on the grounds of race or religion. Our laws must offer sufficient protection from incitement, but we must otherwise retain the opportunity to speak out. To limit instead freedom of expression would be to put at risk the very openness and tolerance that allows people of different faiths to co-exist, practising their faiths without fear.

We should also work to build shared understanding on the interdependence of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. This understanding should underpin debates on subjects such as the right to development, where justice and prosperity can only exist where individuals have the possibility to enjoy human dignity. This is more urgent in the light of the current global recession which is affecting people everywhere. I am working to prepare the London Summit in April that aims to build on the G20's work towards realising a coordinated global response.

My Government was proud to support the joint statement on human rights, sexual orientation and gender identity, delivered to the UN General Assembly on December 18 on behalf of 66 States. This reflects the fact that all human rights are universal.

Last year I suggested that the success of the Council as a whole might be measured by the success of the Universal Periodic Review. We've been encouraged by the seriousness and honesty with which many countries have approached the exercise.

Already there's evidence that the UPR could ensure progress in acceptance of international standards and bring about real change. But still in its infancy, we believe it can be nurtured further. States should neither use the forum to name and shame nor to seek to manipulate the process for a good review. We hope that the practice of many States – to encourage an open debate, self-critical engagement and real commitment to follow up – will be adopted by all States.

This year, in the UK, we confront the poignant tenth anniversary of the murder of a young black man, Stephen Lawrence. The inquiry that followed prompted a major shake up of the UK's approach to combating racism. We've since made significant progress. We have a strategy to increase race equality and community cohesion underpinned by strong commitment to the international human rights framework, including the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. But I recognise too how much more we all need to do. Racism presents a challenge to every country and the UN should be in the lead promoting an effective global response.

The British Government has, on several occasions, expressed its view on the Durban Review Conference: we want the conference to forge collective will to fight against racism in all its forms, in all countries in the world. It should not be seen as an opportunity to press unrelated political interests.

We want a successful review conference and so welcomed US interest in the preparatory process. But we have noted also their disappointment at

the apparent intractability of the current draft. We are similarly concerned. In order to maintain and build upon existing consensus, the outcome must focus on racism that is occurring now, in all parts of the world. We cannot support a process with a skewed focus, be it against the West, or specific countries.

We must ensure that human rights standards are brought to bear to complement our efforts. Freedom of expression must be the cornerstone of our fight against racism. Better implementation of existing international legal standards in this area will serve to offer the protection that is needed from those who incite violence or hatred.

The UK will find unacceptable any attempt to use the Durban process to trivialise or deny the Holocaust, or to renegotiate agreements on the fight against anti-Semitism. The lessons of the Holocaust must remain ingrained in our consciousness as the price of failure to defeat intolerance and hatred.

We hope that there is still time to return the focus of preparations to reviewing work undertaken to combat racism and implement the DDPA, thus enhancing the prospect of a consensus outcome. But a change in this direction will be required for any outcome document to gain our support.

Before concluding I would like to express my appreciation for your work Madam High Commissioner and that of your Office, the special procedures, and the treaty monitoring bodies. Your work, often challenging, deserves the Council's recognition, but the Council must also respect your independence of operation. Your effectiveness depends on your being a credible independent voice, free from the politicisation that so often colours inter-governmental work.

As UK Minister for the UN I have a keen interest in seeing human rights integrated into the two other pillars of the UN; security and development. Progress has been made, but the Council has much to offer to this initiative in demonstrating both that respect for human rights underpins security and development, and also that human rights need not be politically divisive to the point that they're perceived to present an obstacle to wider goals. I encourage the Council to rise to the challenge.

Thank you Mr President