



United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

**Human Rights Council
4th Session**

Geneva, 12 March - 30 March 2007

STATEMENT

BY MR IAN McCARTNEY MP

MINISTER

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Geneva, 13th March 2007

Check against Delivery

Firstly, I'd like to thank you, Mr Chairman, for your leadership. The United Kingdom will continue to support you as you seek to meet the high hopes of the Council at its establishment.

Let me also add the UK's support to the speech made by Minister Steinmeier on behalf of the European Union yesterday.

The former Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, said at the Council's inauguration:

"This Council represents a great new chance for the United Nations, and for humanity, to renew the struggle for human rights."

Let us pause to reflect on that struggle. To consider the thousands – even millions – of the world's citizens, denied those freedoms that are their birthright. To remember the pernicious evils of injustice, marginalisation and discrimination that lie at the root of so much misery and conflict in the world today.

This Council should be the guardian, beacon and groundbreaker for all human rights, everywhere. Its responsibility is unique: to support those nations striving to serve their citizens better; to foster dialogue on shared challenges, which can only have shared solutions; and to promote human rights throughout the UN.

Human rights are by their very nature sensitive, difficult and political. Fundamentally, however, the question is clear: we each either believe in the dignity of our fellow human beings, or we do not. There can be no halfway house. Human rights go to the very heart of the relationship between citizens and their governments, and between governments themselves. States' commitment to uphold human rights at home, and their response to constructive suggestions to improve, will be seen as the measure of their individual standing in the global community.

In the UK, we are seeking to learn the difficult lessons from our own past. In just two weeks we will commemorate the Parliamentary Act that ended the slave trade in the former British Empire, and saw the beginning of the end of that shameful chapter in the world's history. It is with deep regret that we look back on the actions of that time. And with profound hope that we work for a future in which such atrocities can never be repeated.

We want to work with partners around the world to mark this landmark anniversary; and to focus on its message to today's world. It is a tragic fact that millions of our generation are subject to contemporary forms of slavery, two centuries after the argument for its abolition was won. This practice is abhorrent in each of its forms – be that forced labour, the trafficking of individuals, the appalling abuse of children for work and sexual slavery, and as child soldiers. Think of our own children and grandchildren: how can we allow abuse to be inflicted on other children that we would not tolerate for our own?

This Council is uniquely placed to address such issues. Eight months after our work began, the abuse of human rights continues. The Council's attention has been urgently

needed. For this reason, the UK firmly supports the Council's focus on the appalling situation in Darfur. A humanitarian crisis is deepening there before our eyes. Those agencies and NGOs voluntarily trying to help people so desperately in need have themselves been attacked. Bombing campaigns continue to kill and maim.

Every member of this Council agreed to a mission to assess the situation, and the needs of the Government of Sudan. The President of Sudan promised to the UN Secretary-General that the mission would be allowed to visit Sudan. Like so many others, we are appalled that this promise was not honoured. This Council should ask why.

We welcome the report of the assessment mission. It stresses in clear and disturbing terms the extreme gravity of the situation in Darfur. This Council must fulfil its obligation to those innocent civilians whose rights are daily abused.

At the Council's inauguration, many speakers stressed this important opportunity to deepen dialogue and cooperation between states and regions. The Council's discussions have benefited from the valuable input of the Special Procedures. We must continue to draw on it to the full. We have also welcomed the participation of non-governmental organisations. Theirs is a unique perspective, amplifying the voices of those who might not otherwise be heard.

However, despite these and other promising steps, we all have the capacity to work harder to make this Council a success. The need for greater dialogue is no less pressing now than it was at the Council's birth. Last summer the tragic events in Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Israel showed us all too vividly the severity of the challenges that the international community must face. We need to work together towards lasting solutions, in which all concerned have a part, supported by the international community as a whole. In this regard I recall the intensive efforts by the UK to help secure a durable cessation of hostilities in Lebanon, leading to the adoption of Resolution 1701 by the UN Security Council.

In another part of the world, we have seen troubling events since this Council's establishment. We were deeply concerned by the military coup in Fiji last December, and by subsequent human rights abuses – not least, attacks on freedom of expression and the independence of the judiciary.

More recently, the UK utterly condemns the violent repression of peaceful protestors attempting to hold a prayer meeting in Zimbabwe just two days ago. I send my deepest condolences to the family and friends of those killed and injured in this terrible assault. And I offer my solidarity to all Zimbabweans. Uniquely in Zimbabwe, those who came as liberators are now the oppressors.

I have said that the Council can do better. I believe the Council must do better. We must do all we can, working with the governments concerned wherever possible, to ensure greater respect in practice for the human rights that we discuss in theory here.

This respect is alarmingly lacking in some countries. The people of Burma have suffered for far too long. They do not enjoy the most basic of human rights, including the rights to freedom of speech and association; and the fundamental tenets of good

governance and the rule of law are not upheld. Serious human rights abuses continue to be committed, particularly in areas of armed conflict.

For these reasons, the UK co-sponsored the UN Security Council Resolution on Burma that was put to the vote in January. We welcomed agreement amongst all Security Council members that there were serious issues of concern in Burma. Some believed the appropriate UN body to take forward action on Burma was this very Council. We look forward to working with all of its members to address this profoundly disturbing situation.

I am deeply concerned by the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. One of the difficulties with the DPRK is the relative lack of awareness there of much of what goes on in the world outside. To try to help remedy this, the UK is providing intensive language tuition to North Korean officials, in a UK environment that, we hope, will stimulate a deeper knowledge of the social and cultural understandings that underpin our society.

The Council has a vital role to play in developing respect for the rights enshrined in the UN's instruments. We need to talk more, not less, about issues where we disagree. We need to answer hard questions, and take uncomfortable decisions. For example, we need to talk about the rights associated with labour, recognise the value of free trade unions, and condemn their repression.

We need to confront the persistent discrimination against people worldwide based on their sexual orientation – a discrimination all the more invidious through being too often concealed behind some other, more common prejudice. As we mark the fortieth anniversary of the Sexual Offences Act in the UK, we pause to remember that the majority of gay people around the world still live in countries where simply being themselves is a crime. Human rights belong to everyone. Sexual orientation cannot be a qualifying factor.

The Council is the sum of its parts. Its success rests squarely with its members. They have a particular responsibility for this unique institution. We take this seriously. We have honoured our pledge to work actively for an effective, balanced Universal Periodic Review. We have contributed to Council discussions, and sought to deepen our dialogue with states and NGOs across the world. We expect all Council members to show a similar level of commitment to the historic endeavour of building this new human rights body, and to human rights themselves.

In this context, we welcomed the announcement by the government of Sri Lanka of the formation of the International Independent Eminent Persons Group. The effective investigation of human rights violations, and holding their perpetrators to account, would be, for the Government of Sri Lanka, a powerful statement that there should be no impunity for human rights violations. As this work moves forward, we urge the Government of Sri Lanka to allow the Commission of Inquiry and the Eminent Persons to carry out their functions effectively and independently.

This Council is rightly seeking to build its actions on the bedrock of cooperation. This is the surest foundation of better implementation of human rights. We have unfortunately already seen how quickly understanding and dialogue breaks down

when cooperation is denied. The issue here is clear: cooperation can only work if all UN members voluntarily recognise and cooperate with the Council's mechanisms, no matter how they are created.

We can only solve problems through understanding born of dialogue, openness, and transparency. It is with this sincere conviction that the UK maintains a standing invitation to the Council's Special Procedures. We look forward to hosting a visit by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief later this year. Our new Council should develop new approaches to such issues. I was especially disappointed that it did not prove possible to hold a roundtable discussion at this session on the promotion of religious tolerance. These are challenging issues, which we want to discuss. To that end, in the UK, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has established a panel of experts to help us explore them more fully.

We can all point to other examples that demonstrate the benefits of fruitful dialogue. To name one, we welcome *the commitment* by President Uribe of Colombia to renew the mandate of the Office of the High Commissioner's presence there. We hope the continued presence of the Office will support the crucial work of national mechanisms to protect human rights, including the constitutional court and ombudsman's office. Colombia continues to grapple with serious challenges relating to the armed conflict and illegal drugs trade. Their solution lies not only in the continued political will of the government to change, but in its constructive engagement with civil society and the international community, and that community's support in return.

Looking ahead, in the next months the Council will take decisions about its future shape and the tools at its disposal – in effect, how to enshrine a model of cooperation, and encourage all to participate in it. These will determine the Council's ability to respond to emerging challenges, and to support states as they seek to develop their human rights implementation. These decisions are key to the positive future of our Council.

The UK is committed to making the Council as effective a leader in human rights as it possibly can be. Human rights issues are complex, and their discussion can be difficult. But we are committed to advancing the cause of human rights, and consider that this Council has a unique opportunity to do this. For this reason, *I am pleased to announce the UK's intention to run for re-election to the Council next year.* We believe that we have a real contribution to make. We are constantly seeking to develop respect for human rights in the UK itself; and volunteer to be one of the first to discuss our work under the new Universal Periodic Review.

As the third state to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture, we welcome the first meeting of the sub-committee last month. We look forward to supporting its work as we combat the practice of torture worldwide. As important, we will continue to work towards the abolition of the death penalty throughout the world.

When I last addressed this Council, I spoke of the individuals for whose benefit it was formed. The nameless millions whose human rights are neglected, overlooked or abused. I said that, like each of us, they deserve a dignity and freedom that has nothing to do with where they live; but with the very humanity that they share with us.

Our fellow human beings must be at the core of all that we do. Our work cannot be about politicised rhetoric. It can, and must, always be about real people and their struggle against injustice, conflict, and abuse. The faceless millions, whom we will never meet, but who are relying on us to work on their behalf. The heart of our work must be about giving a voice to these voiceless, and power to these powerless.