

Rt. Hon. Elizabeth Truss MP  
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs

19<sup>th</sup> October 2021

Dear Foreign Secretary,

Congratulations on your appointment to the FCDO. As Secretary of State for the FCDO one of the most important issues you will need to address are the violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief in countries around the world.

As stakeholders working in the area of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), we write to you about the current situation in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of international troops and the rapid resurgence and establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (also known as the Taliban) Government. We urge the UK Government to act swiftly to ensure that the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme will include those at risk of death due to their adherence to another faith or belief within the total of 20,000 seeking asylum in the UK.

Breaches of Freedom of Religion or Belief have been in evidence over the last twenty years and longer in Afghanistan, with religious minorities, atheists, and humanists being forced to exist 'underground' or suffering direct attacks. This includes the bombing of the Gurdwara Har Rai Sahib, Kabul (a Sikh place of worship on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2020 and then the subsequent bomb attack at the funeral of those killed on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2020). In the *USCIRF Annual Report 2021* on Afghanistan, it was noted that the United Nations reported 8,820 civilian casualties (3,035 killed and 5,785 injured) in 2020, with some of the most brutal attacks targeting minorities of marginalised religions or beliefs. Over the last ten years the single remaining Christian church building in Afghanistan used by international personnel was permanently closed. The last remaining Jew in Afghanistan, Zebulon Simentov left on the 7<sup>th</sup> September 2021. There are currently just 170 Sikhs left in Afghanistan – most waiting to be evacuated.

More recently there appears to be reports of increasing violations by the Taliban who are believed to be seeking out individuals who adhere to anything other than Sunni Islam, in an attempt to bring about what they are referring to as "a pure Islamic state". The Shia Hazara community are particularly vulnerable due to their ethnicity and their long problematic history with the majority Sunni religious community in Afghanistan. This targeting is based upon deeply entrenched beliefs that have not changed over centuries of following the religious texts found in the *Dars-i-Nizami* curriculum, which includes the Shar'ia law, taught in Madrassas in Pakistan to Taliban members.

The *APPG FoRB report* published on the 18<sup>th</sup> August includes an excellent summary with the following stipulations under this law:

- a) Christians who have converted from an Islamic family background
  - i) Any sane adult male deemed to be a convert from Islam should be killed after being given three days to repent and return to Islam.
  - ii) Any sane adult female deemed to have left Islam is to be imprisoned until she repents.

The signatories of this letter are disturbed at the continuing breach of FoRB, as highlighted in the Archbishop of Canterbury's speech to the House of Lords on the 18<sup>th</sup> August 2021:

We must renew commitment to freedom of religion and belief everywhere, a point not much mentioned so far. That will count in Pakistan and Afghanistan for Christians and religious communities such as Shia, Hindus, Jains, Ahmadis and Sikhs.

Women's rights have always been a concern, and despite the successes made over the years the international community is deeply concerned that since the Taliban took over control on August 15<sup>th</sup> 2021 the lives of all women and girls will be negatively impacted. While this has been a focus of discussion in general, we would like to bring to the UK Government's attention the complex threat of a double vulnerability for women belonging to minority groups due to their gender and beliefs. For example, women from religious minorities have had their freedoms severely curtailed due to fear of kidnapping, forced conversion, and forced marriage.

**We, the undersigned, convey our utmost concern and strongly recommend to the UK Government that you ensure the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme will include those at risk of death due to their adherence to a minority faith or belief within the 20,000 Afghans seeking asylum in the UK.**

This would be in addition to those who are already recognised as vulnerable because they worked alongside the allied forces and officials (translators, human rights defenders, women at risk, members of the media etc.)

**We also call on the Government to request the protection and safety of those adhering to marginalised religions and beliefs whilst remaining in Afghanistan, by the insistence that FoRB be included in any negotiations with the Taliban government.**

The protection and safety of those crossing borders into Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan should also be ensured, especially for those holding beliefs that are also marginalised within recipient countries. In particular, this should be considered in relation to Pakistan, where the situation is already grave for religious and belief minorities.

Yours sincerely,

Lord David Alton	All Faiths Network
Dr Lisa Cameron MP	Christian Solidarity Worldwide
Rt Rev'd Bishop Christopher Chessun, Bishop of Southwark Diocese	Andrew Copson, Chief Executive Humanists UK
The Baroness Cox, independent member of the House of Lords	Emma Dipper, Director, Gender & Religious Freedom
Rt Hon Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP	Stephen Evans, CEO, National Secular Society
Sir George Howarth MP	Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal
Rt Rev Philip Mountstephen, Bishop of Truro	Mosaic Middle East
Brendan O'Hara MP	Elder Alan T Philips, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints
Jim Shannon MP	Prayer Pioneers
Tommy Sheppard MP	Dr James Smith CBE, CEO of Aegis Trust
Lord Singh of Wimbledon	Tearfund
	Westminster United Nations Association

cc. Fiona Bruce MP, Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief