

Rt Honourable David Lammy MP
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

26 February 2025

Sent via email

Subject: UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group letter regarding civil society engagement

Dear Foreign Secretary,

We, the UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group (UK APWG) and partner organisations, are writing to urge the UK government to strengthen its commitment to preventing atrocities by adopting a comprehensive atrocity prevention strategy. Furthermore, in light of the devastating USAID cuts and the recent announcement that the UK will cut its aid spend, we call on the government to strengthen and safeguard civil society leadership in this time of crisis and ensure that the Civil Society Covenant is anchored by adequate funding, and that it informs and shapes foreign policy and practice, including its application across the UK's global network of embassies. These actions are essential to upholding the UK's solemn obligations under international law and advancing our collective commitment to preventing and responding to atrocities worldwide.

Our working group is a coalition of over twenty-five UK-based civil society organisations, NGOs, research institutions, and experts working to build a world where mass atrocity crimes and other forms of identity-based violence are less likely. Our shared mission is to help strengthen the UK's contributions to preventing and mitigating mass atrocity crimes, including crimes against humanity, genocide, war crimes and ethnic cleansing.

On Human Rights Day, we were pleased to hear the government put forward welcome commitments towards upholding these obligations, emphasising 'human rights, rule of law and democratic governance not just as abstract values', but as 'powerful enablers for the key missions of this government' and setting out five priorities to make this a reality. We welcome these commitments and offer our support in this endeavour.

The government's commitment to prioritise human rights and governance principles in both prevention and response to global challenges is a welcome one, and we agree with Lord Collins' assertion that 'our ability to anticipate atrocities will be critical to preventing them'. Indeed, of today's major and emerging foreign policy crises, the majority — including Ukraine, Sudan, Syria, Israel and Palestine, Myanmar, and Xinjiang— are characterised by deliberate efforts to attack and displace civilians, often based on their identity. This uptick in violence represents a readiness of states to intentionally violate human rights and international law to consolidate political power, territory, and assets that must be addressed as part of any diplomatic response.

We agree that human rights, democratic governance and upholding international law must therefore be at the very centre of strategic foreign policymaking. However, over the past decade, the UK has too often found itself reactive rather than proactive in the face of major foreign policy challenges. A failure to consistently safeguard human rights has hampered the UK's international standing and its broader strategic approach to the intentional violations of rights. The failure to stand in solidarity with victims of atrocity crimes or to adequately confront their perpetration, whether in Palestine and or in Xinjiang, has damaged the UK's reputation and contributed to the erosion of the rules-based system at a time when we need it most. To effectively confront identity-based violence and atrocity crimes, then, it is crucial to prioritise collaboration between the FCDO and the Ministry of Defence. This will help ensure that the UK upholds its commitment to the rule of law within its own military and foreign policy, integrating lessons learned to ensure its responses to conflicts are not only preventative but also grounded in accountability, compliance and the protection of civilians.

In an era of increasing instability, we welcome the government's commitments to protect human rights defenders, champion equal rights, and defend the rights of the most vulnerable and marginalised. Global challenges such as climate change, democratic backsliding, population movements, and technological advancement are likely to exacerbate violence and instability in the coming decade and increase pressure on already fractured communities. Without concerted action and dedicated budget lines, we are likely to see increased societal polarisation and the weaponisation of identity-based grievances and prejudices contributing to an ongoing increase of atrocity violence. It is imperative that the government develop new, innovative strategies to confront violations of international law, including the commission of atrocity crimes, and the deliberate unpicking of the rules-based system. Our group stands ready to help support such urgent development.

We welcome the government's commitments to empower civil society and its recognition that change will only happen through partnership; it is vital these principles are now reflected across both domestic and international policy, practice and funding priorities. Under the last government, civil society expertise was largely excluded. Much trust has been lost as a result; it is crucial that the new government and its foreign office ministers seek to rebuild that trust. The Prime Minister rightly noted that in order 'to fix the foundations of our country we need a fundamental reset of the relationship between government and civil society'. Indeed, this government's commitments to work in partnership with the sector, as enshrined in the forthcoming 'Civil Society Covenant', can ensure those most proximate to and most expert on atrocity violence, both in the UK and around the world, are heard and not instrumentalised, as partners toward informed policymaking. As the vital work of hundreds of organisations is curtailed in light of the sweeping cuts in recent weeks, human rights defenders and state allies alike will be looking to the UK as a champion of civil society leadership and world leader in development and diplomacy to collectively meet the scale of the challenge.

We therefore urge the government to take three critical steps to meaningfully embed atrocity prevention across policy, ensure its civil society covenant is as robust, equitable and constructive as possible, and commit to adequate long-term funding to support civil society partnership:

1. **Extend the Civil Society Covenant:** The forthcoming Civil Society Covenant must apply to the work the FCDO and its global network of embassies. This extension would ensure that the voices of in-country civil society and diaspora groups are meaningfully incorporated into policymaking processes and that a holistic and consistent approach across domestic and international civil society is institutionalised. It is vital that this engagement is authentic and participatory, not instrumentalised or tokenistic, to foster trust and informed policymaking.
2. **Reinstate the Human Rights Advisory Board:** Re-establishing the Human Rights Advisory Board or similar advisory function would provide essential guidance in navigating global human rights challenges and championing equal rights for all. This group should serve as a key mechanism for promoting collaboration between the government and civil society organisations and should include atrocity prevention, civilian protection and gender expertise.
3. **Adopt a national atrocity prevention strategy:** A department within the Office for Conflict, Mediation and Stabilisation in Whitehall has been tasked with developing the UK's approach to preventing these crimes, but still lacks the necessary strategy, capabilities, dedicated funding and political leadership to deliver this important mandate effectively. From ensuring our supply chains are free from forced labour and addressing human trafficking, to utilising our banking structures to sanction perpetrators and halt mass atrocity violence, a world-leading atrocity prevention strategy pioneered by this government and anchored by adequate funds has the potential to embed human rights in and across policy through a whole-of-government approach that leverages international partnerships to confront the challenges of our time.

We would be most grateful to meet with you to discuss these critical issues. We thank you for your consideration and stand ready to support and collaborate with the government to achieve these important goals.

Yours sincerely,

Protection Approaches

Videre Est Credere

Sri Lanka Campaign

People for Equality and Relief in Lanka (PEARL)

Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights

Burma Campaign UK

Rights for Peace

UNA – UK

South Asia Justice Campaign

Peace Direct

Institute for Development Studies

United Against Inhumanity (UAI)

Humanity and Inclusion

