

**DEBATE PACK**

CDP 026 (2021) | 5 March 2021

# Press freedoms and safety of protesters in India

**Westminster Hall****Monday 8 March 2021****4.30pm to 6.00pm****Petitions Committee debate led by  
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The proceedings of this debate can be viewed on [Parliamentlive.uk](https://www.parliamentlive.uk)

The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

# 1. E-petition

This e-petition debate follows a petition uploaded to the [Petitions website](#). As this e-petition has attracted over 100,000 signatures, the House of Commons Petitions Committee agreed that a debate will take place.

These sessions are an opportunity for MPs to discuss the important issues raised by an e-petition. However, they cannot directly change the law or result in a vote to implement the request of the petition.

The debate will be held under the motion, "That this House has considered e-petition [563473](#) relating to press freedoms and safety of protestors in India."

The petition will close on 17 June 2021 and at the time of writing, has attracted 115,684 signatures. It states:

Urge the Indian Government to ensure safety of protestors & press freedom

The Government must make a public statement on the #kissanprotests & press freedoms.

India is the world's largest democracy & democratic engagement and freedom of the press are fundamental rights and a positive step towards creating an India that works for all.

A public statement by the Government will encourage transparency & accountability in the world's Largest Democracy.

## UK Government response

The government responded on 15 February 2021:

Media freedom and the right to protest are essential to robust democracies such as the UK and India. Governments have the power to enforce law and order if a protest crosses the line into illegality.

The UK Government is conscious of the level of concern regarding the farmers' protests in India. We appreciate that there are strong feelings in the United Kingdom towards the issue and that many British citizens have family ties to farming communities in India.

Through our High Commission in New Delhi and Deputy High Commissions across India, the Government is following developments closely. We understand that the Government of India has held several rounds of talks with farmers' unions, and

that in January the Supreme Court put three farming laws on hold and designated an expert committee to scrutinise the laws.

As would be expected between close partners, we have constructive discussions on a wide range of issues with India. The UK considers farming reform a matter for the Government of India. We consider the right to peaceful protest, freedom of speech, and internet freedom vital in any democracy. We also recognise that governments have the power to enforce law and order if a protest crosses the line into illegality. We look to the Indian government to uphold all freedoms and rights guaranteed in India's strong constitution.

The Foreign Secretary discussed the farmers' protests with his Indian counterpart during his visit to India in December 2020. Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State responsible for South Asia and for Human Rights, speaks regularly to his opposite number in the Ministry of External Affairs and to the Indian High Commissioner in the UK. Human rights issues form part of their dialogue.

An independent media is essential to any robust democracy. The UK is committed to media freedom, and to championing democracy and human rights around the world. In 2018, the UK Government launched the Media Freedom Campaign to shine a global spotlight on media freedom and increase the cost to those abusing media freedom and persecuting journalists.

We regularly engage with India's vibrant media, which promotes lively debate across the political spectrum. The British High Commission has undertaken project work such as the annual South Asia Journalism Fellowship Programme, under our flagship Chevening scholarship programme, which funded 17 fellows, including seven from India in 2019. In 2020, we supported the Thomson Reuters Foundation to run workshops for journalists to report on a range of human rights matters.

The UK Government will continue to follow the farmers' protests closely. We respect that agricultural reforms are a matter for India, and will continue to champion human rights globally.

## 2. Background

### Agricultural reforms passed September 2020

The Indian Government introduced three [agricultural reform laws](#) in June 2020. These laws were [passed](#) by the Indian Parliament at the end of September.

The political opposition and farmers opposed to the reforms claimed that these laws were [rushed through](#) with little consultation. Significant changes in the laws include:

- relaxing restrictions on the purchase and sale of farm produce that take place through state government-controlled market places (mandis);
- loosening restrictions on the stocking and movement of food items that are classed as “essential commodities”; and
- enabling farmers to enter into contract farming agreements with buyers and providing local dispute settlement mechanisms.

### Agriculture in India

Agriculture is central to the Indian economy. In 2019, around 43 per cent of workers in India [were employed](#) in the agricultural sector. In the same year agriculture [accounted for](#) around 16 per cent of India’s GDP. Many economists [agree that](#) the sector requires reform, and the issue has been much discussed by politicians from all parties in India, but this is the first time in a few decades that such major reforms have been made into law.

India’s agricultural sector is dominated by smaller producers – 68 percent of farmers [own landholdings](#) of less than one hectare. Its [agricultural labour productivity](#) is less than a third of that of China, and only about one percent of that of the United States.

### Farmers fears and Government hopes

The Government have said these reforms will help farmers and will contribute to their 2016 [pledge to double farmers’ incomes](#) by 2022. The Agriculture Minister, Narendra Singh Tomar, [laid out his hopes](#) for the sector when they were first announced in June 2020:

The freedom to produce, hold, move, distribute and supply will lead to harnessing of economies of scale and attract private sector/foreign direct investment into agriculture sector. It will help drive up investment in cold storages and modernisation of food supply chain.

The government, while liberalising the regulatory environment, has also ensured that interests of consumers are safeguarded. It has been provided in the amendment that in situations such as war, famine, extraordinary price rise and natural calamity, such agricultural foodstuff can be regulated.

Farmers opposed to the reforms [fear that](#) small landholders will struggle to wield any bargaining power over private companies, and will find it difficult to bring disputes against them also. They also [worry that](#) the reforms will see the end of government-backed wholesale markets and assured prices, leaving them with little protection from market forces.

### **Protests start**

In November, tens of thousands of farmers started mass-protests against the laws, with the biggest demonstrations centred on the capital, New Delhi. Many of the farmers at these protests are from the states of Punjab and Haryana, major agricultural producing states. These states are also [said to be](#) among the biggest beneficiaries of the current system of agricultural subsidies and price controls.

Police have erected barricades around Delhi to prevent protestors from entering the centre of the city.

The protests have at times descended into violence. On 26 January, during the annual parade celebrating India's Republic Day, some protesting farmers using tractors broke through police barricades to storm Delhi's Red Fort complex. Clashes broke out with police, [leading to](#) the death of one protestor and more than 300 policemen were injured.

Leaders of the protests condemned the violence, [blaming](#) the chaos on "rogue elements" among an otherwise peaceful march. They said they would not call off the protests.

### **Restrictions on social media and blocking of internet access at protest sites**

A few days after these clashes, India's Government ordered that mobile internet services be suspended in three areas around Delhi, where farmers were staging a hunger strike as part of the ongoing protests. The [Government said](#) the measures were necessary to "maintain public safety".

On 2 February, the Indian Home Affairs Ministry ordered Twitter to suspend hundreds of Twitter accounts, including [according to](#) *The Guardian*, "those belonging to news websites, activists and actors", after the Government said users were posting content inciting violence. The newspaper quoted a Government source as saying that the order was issued against accounts that were using the hashtag "#modiplanningfarmersgenocide" that started on 30 January. The accounts were suspended for 12 hours.

### **Arrests of journalists and activists and Human rights organisations response**

In early February, the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) [expressed concern](#) over the arrest of eight journalists at the end of January, who were covering the protests, on what it called "baseless criminal charges".

Human Rights Watch also condemned the shutting down of mobile internet services at protest sites, saying:

Under international human rights law, India has an obligation to ensure that restrictions on the internet and other forms of communication are provided by law and are a necessary and proportionate response to a specific security concern. Officials should not use broad, indiscriminate shutdowns to curtail the flow of information or to harm people's ability to freely assemble and express political views.

Amnesty International also [published a critique](#) of the Indian Government, linking the Government's approach to the protests to other examples it claimed were indicative of an intolerance towards criticism.

The UN's Human Rights Office (OCHR) [tweeted](#) a call for both sides to exercise restraint, and for the rights to peaceful protest to be respected:

We call on the authorities and protesters to exercise maximum restraint in ongoing farmers protests. The rights to peaceful assembly and expression should be protected both offline and online. It is crucial to find equitable solutions with due respect to human rights for all.

The [arrest of climate activist Disha Ravi](#) by police, reportedly on charges of "sedition", after she helped prepare a "protestor toolkit" for the farmers protests, also raised concerns about freedom of speech. Several days later a [Delhi court ordered](#) she be released from custody.

### **Indian Government response to criticism**

The Indian Government has been frustrated by criticisms from foreign governments and [celebrities](#).

On 4 December, India's foreign ministry [summoned Canadian diplomats](#) after Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [voiced concern](#) for the farmers during a Facebook Live session. The ministry said the comments constituted "unacceptable interference" and risked damaging ties between the two nations.

On 3 February, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs [put out a statement](#) on "on recent comments by foreign individuals and entities on the farmers' protests". The statement emphasised that the reforms would in their view, improve conditions for farmers, and that a "very small section of farmers in parts of India have some reservations" about them. The statement mentioned the many rounds of talks it has undertaken with protest leaders. It further defended the actions of India's police and condemned "sensationalist" social media hashtags and comments:

Indian police forces have handled these protests with utmost restraint. It may be noted that hundreds of men and women serving in the police have been physically attacked, and in some cases stabbed and seriously wounded.

We would like to emphasise that these protests must be seen in the context of India's democratic ethos and polity, and the efforts of the Government and the concerned farmer groups to resolve the impasse.

Before rushing to comment on such matters, we would urge that the facts be ascertained, and a proper understanding of the issues at hand be undertaken. The temptation of sensationalist social media hashtags and comments, especially when resorted to by celebrities and others, is neither accurate nor responsible.

### **Political deadlock**

In December the Government [offered to make some amendments](#) to the laws. It also said it would provide written guarantees that the [Minimum Support Price \(MSP\)](#) mechanism would continue. However, the farmers unions leading the protests said the laws should be repealed in full, and were [supported in that call](#) by the main opposition Congress party.

The MSP is a minimum price set on certain crops the Government believes requires support, and is also the price that government agencies pay farmers whenever they procure the particular crop. The MSP is not affected by the new laws, however, many farmers fear it could be next for reform. The mechanism does not currently have a legislative basis.

In January, the Government [offered to suspend the laws](#) for 18 months, however the umbrella body of unions leading the protests, the *Samyukt Kisan Morcha*, once again said they would only accept the full repeal of the legislation.

### **Supreme Court suspends the laws**

In January, India's Supreme Court suspended the three Acts, and established a [four-man committee](#) to look into farmers' concerns over the laws.

The [justices said](#) they were "extremely disappointed" with how negotiations between the Government and activists had gone so far. The judges also expressed concern at the lack of consultation with farmers when originally passing the law.

This has not satisfied the protestors, who along with opposition political parties [claim that](#) the members of the Committee are all pro-reform, and farmers unions have said they will [not participate](#) in its work.

### **New laws on online content**

At the end of February news organisations [reported](#) that they had seen draft versions of new Government rules to regulate online content including social media.

The rules would require companies to take down offensive content that threatens the “unity, integrity, defence, security or sovereignty of India” or “causes incitement” within 36 hours of an order, [according to the Financial Times](#).

The newspaper quoted IT minister Ravi Shankar Prasad as saying “we want them to be more responsible, more accountable”, and “if they [won’t], then whatever provisions are there in the law will take their course.”

Mr Prasad described the rules as “soft touch oversight” and called on companies to “self-regulate”.

The new “Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code” could also require companies to break into encrypted messages.

### **UK Government response**

The UK Government addressed concerns from the public and NGOs in its [response to an e-petition](#) on the protests, being discussed by the House of Commons [Petitions Committee](#) on [8 March](#).

It has also responded to questions in Parliament on the subject from [MPs](#) and [Peers](#).

In its responses the Government have expressed their support for “the right to peaceful protest, freedom of speech, and internet freedom vital in any democracy”. They have said that the protests have been discussed in meetings between UK ministers and their Indian counterparts, but that they also respect that agricultural reforms are “an internal matter for India”.

### 3. Press and media articles

The following is a selection of press and media articles relevant to this debate.

Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or accuracy of external content.

**[India imposes sweeping new social media rules](#)**

Financial Times  
Stephanie Findlay  
25 February 2021

**[Farmers' protests in India: why have new laws caused anger?](#)**

The Guardian  
Hannah Ellis-Petersen  
12 February 2021

**[Amnesty International decries crackdown on supporters of farmers' protests](#)**

The Tribune  
9 February 2021

**[Amid protests, a 'chilling development for the press' in India](#)**

Christian Science Monitor  
Sheikh Saaliq and Krutika Pathi  
5 February 2021

**[Why journalists in India are under attack](#)**

BBC News Online  
Soutik Biswas  
4 February 2021

**[India is turning to colonial-era laws to silence journalists](#)**

Open Democracy  
Samar Halarnkar  
3 February 2021

**[Indian journalists face criminal charges over police shooting reports](#)**

The Guardian  
Hannah Ellis-Petersen  
1 February 2021

**[116 journalists killed in India since 1990](#)**

National Herald India  
12 December 2020

**[UK spokesperson clarifies after British PM confuses farmers' protest with India-Pak dispute](#)**

India Today  
Geeta Mohan  
10 December 2020

## 4. Parliamentary material

### 4.1 PQs

#### [Topical Questions](#)

**02 Mar 2021 | 690 c114**

**Asked by: Alan Brown**

The perception that corporate interests and market-friendly laws are prioritised over economic fairness, local communities and the environment has resulted in the Indian farming protests. Given the Foreign Office silence on the issue, will the Prime Minister be raising the injustices that the farmers feel when he visits India?

**Answered by: Dominic Raab | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

I appreciate that there are concerns on this issue; we have a large Indian diaspora and have had lots of constituents writing in. I did raise the matter with Foreign Minister Jaishankar when I was in India and we discussed it. Ultimately, the situation is the result of a reform agenda that the elected Government are pressing through. It is of course contentious and we have discussed it, but ultimately it is for the Government of India to decide.

#### [India: Human Rights](#)

**01 Mar 2021 | 155427**

**Asked by: Marco Longhi**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what recent discussions his Department has had with the Indian Government on promoting the (a) safety of protesters and (b) right of press freedom in that country.

**Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The Foreign Secretary discussed protests about agricultural reforms with his Indian counterpart during his visit to India in December. It is our view that the right to gather lawfully and demonstrate a point of view is common to all democracies. Governments also have the power to enforce law and order if a protest crosses the line into illegality. We consider an independent media essential to any robust democracy. Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for South Asia and Minister responsible for Human Rights, discussed the UK's commitment to promoting media freedom, through the Media Freedom Coalition, with India's Minister of State for External Affairs in July.

#### [India: Agriculture](#)

**01 Mar 2021 | 155263**

**Asked by: Rupa Huq**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps he has taken to assess the effect of recent agricultural protests in India on the (a) Conceptual Framework on

Agriculture and (b) UK-India Infrastructure Technical Co-operation Facility.

**Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The British High Commission in New Delhi monitors developments in India, including recent reforms in agricultural law. We work with our partners in India to build capacity and share expertise to promote prosperity. Through the FCDO's Conceptual Framework on Agriculture, we support small-scale farmers to grow sustainably by improving market access and finance. With regards to the UK-India Infrastructure Technical Co-Operation Facility, there have been no projects relating to agriculture or agri-infrastructure under this programme. We will continue to follow the wider situation closely, respecting that agricultural reforms are a matter for India.

**[India: Agriculture](#)**

**24 Feb 2021 | 155375**

**Asked by: Afzal Khan**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what meetings he has had with British Sikh organisations on the ongoing farmers protests in India.

**Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The Sikh community is an important part of British society and we value our engagement with Sikh organisations on a range of issues. We have not met British Sikh organisations specifically to discuss the farmers' protests, but the FCDO has exchanged correspondence with several organisations and individuals on this matter. This month, the FCDO issued a public response to an e-petition regarding the farmers' protests. The UK Government will continue to follow the protests closely, while respecting that agricultural reforms are a matter for India.

**[India: Human Rights](#)**

**22 Feb 2021 | HL13094**

**Asked by: Lord Hussain**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to protect the rights under international law to freedom of association and peaceful assembly in India.

**Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The right to gather lawfully and demonstrate a point of view is common to all democracies. Governments also have the power to enforce law and order if a protest crosses the line into illegality. We look to India to uphold the freedoms and rights guaranteed in its strong constitution and the international instruments to which India is a party. We were aware that some restrictions on internet connectivity were imposed at protest sites and welcome their removal. During his visit to India in December 2020, the Foreign Secretary discussed the protests with his Indian counterpart, whilst making clear that agricultural reform is an internal matter for the Indian authorities.

**[India: Farmers](#)**

**22 Feb 2021 | HL13093**

**Asked by: Lord Hussain**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of reports of (1) internet blockades, (2) use of force, (3) intimidation by state policy, and (4) human rights abuses, against farmer protestors in India.

**Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The right to gather lawfully and demonstrate a point of view is common to all democracies. Governments also have the power to enforce law and order if a protest crosses the line into illegality. We look to India to uphold the freedoms and rights guaranteed in its strong constitution and the international instruments to which India is a party. We were aware that some restrictions on internet connectivity were imposed at protest sites and welcome their removal. During his visit to India in December 2020, the Foreign Secretary discussed the protests with his Indian counterpart, whilst making clear that agricultural reform is an internal matter for the Indian authorities.

**[Business of the House](#)**

**11 Feb 2021 | 689 c494**

**Asked by: Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi**

Currently the largest protest on the planet, the peaceful farmers' protest in India has been ongoing for months now. Given our serious anxieties, more than 100 hon. Members signed a letter to the Prime Minister seeking his intervention. Well over 100,000 constituents—incredibly, from every single one of the 650 UK constituencies—have signed an online petition, including more than 3,000 from my Slough constituency. Given those facts, and given the arrest of journalists, peaceful protesters and human rights activists such as Nodeep Kaur, who, it is alleged, has been tortured and endured sexual assault while in police custody, will the Leader of the House please facilitate a debate on this important matter at the earliest opportunity, just as we debated a petition in this Chamber last week?

**Answering member: Jacob Rees-Mogg | Leader of the House**

The hon. Gentleman raises something that is a matter of concern across the House and across constituencies. The right to peaceful protest is a fundamental one, along with freedom of speech and internet freedom. India is a very proud democracy and a country with which we have the strongest possible relations. I happen to think that over the next century our relationship with India may well be our most important relationship with any country in the world. As India is our friend, it is only right that we make representations when we think that things are happening that are not in the interests of the reputation of the country of which we are a friend. The Foreign Secretary discussed the farmers' protest with his Indian counterpart in December. The UK Government will continue to follow the farmers' protest closely. Agricultural reform is a domestic policy issue for India. We will continue to champion human rights globally, and having the chairmanship of the UN Security Council this month is a part of that.

**[India: Farmers](#)****09 Feb 2021 | 147080****Asked by: Paul Bristow**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what representations he has made to the Indian Government on restrictions on the use of the internet and 4G access to farmers protesting against the 2020 Indian Agriculture Acts.

**Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

We are aware that some restrictions on internet connectivity have been imposed at protest sites and call for these to be lifted as soon as possible. The right to gather lawfully and demonstrate a point of view is common to all democracies. Governments also have the power to enforce law and order if a protest crosses the line into illegality. During his visit to India, the Foreign Secretary discussed the protests with his Indian counterpart, whilst making clear that the handling of protests is an internal matter for the Indian authorities.

**[Arms Trade: India](#)****08 Feb 2021 | 148880****Asked by: Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi**

To ask the Secretary of State for International Trade, whether the Government is taking steps to ensure that no UK made weapons or arms are exported to India where such weapons may be used in repressing the ongoing farmers protests in that country.

**Answering member: Ranil Jayawardena | Department for International Trade**

Arms exports require an export licence, and all export licence applications are assessed against the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria (the "Consolidated Criteria"). The Consolidated Criteria take into account our obligations under the Arms Trade Treaty and other relevant rules of international law. They provide a thorough risk assessment framework and require us to think hard about the possible impact of providing equipment and its capabilities.

These are not decisions we take lightly and HM Government will not grant an export licence if to do so would be inconsistent with the Consolidated Criteria.

**[India: Agriculture](#)****05 Feb 2021 | 145187****Asked by: Nicola Richards**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment the Government has made of the effect of the Indian Government's legislative reforms to farming on Punjabi and Sikh communities in India.

**Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

Our British High Commission in New Delhi monitors political, social and economic developments in India including agricultural reform. We are aware of concerns in India and here in the UK about how these reforms might affect farming communities. Agricultural reform is a domestic policy issue for the Indian authorities to address.

**[Human Rights](#)**

**02 Feb 2021 | 143111**

**Asked by: Stuart Anderson**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps he is taking to help protect human rights and the right to peaceful protest (a) in India and (b) around the world.

**Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

Respect for human rights and democratic freedoms underpin the UK's foreign policy. UK Ministers and officials have regular and frank discussions about the full range of human rights concerns, wherever they occur, and we use our bilateral relationships, our development programmes, and our presence in multilateral institutions to drive progress. In discussions with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ministers and officials raise the most pressing human rights issues of the day. We also set out concerns on a wide range of countries at every session of the Human Rights Council. The UK co-sponsored a resolution on Peaceful Protests at the 44th session of the UN Human Rights Council.

We engage with India on a range of human rights matters, including at ministerial level. On his visit to India in December 2020, the Foreign Secretary discussed human rights with the Minister of External Affairs, Dr Subrahmanyam Jaishankar.

**[India: Farmers](#)**

**01 Feb 2021 | 144841**

**Asked by: Afzal Khan**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment he has made of the protests by farmers in India on 26 January 2021; and whether he has made representations to his Indian counterpart on the use of force by the police in response to those protests.

**Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The right to gather lawfully and demonstrate a point of view is common to all democracies. Governments also have the power to enforce law and order if a protest crosses the line into illegality. Officials in the British High Commission in Delhi and in Deputy High Commissions across India continue to monitor closely the protests over agricultural reforms. The Foreign Secretary previously discussed the protests with his Indian counterpart during his visit to India in December 2020, whilst

making clear that the handling of protests is an internal matter for the Indian authorities.

### [India: Religious Freedom](#)

**01 Feb 2021 | 143894**

#### **Asked by: Afzal Khan**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment he has made of the effect of the recent closure of Amnesty International's offices in India on human rights and religious freedoms in that country.

#### **Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The freedom of civil society organisations to operate underpins any functioning democracy - in the UK, in India, or anywhere else. We have underlined the importance of organisations like Amnesty International with our contacts in the Government of India. The Minister of State for South Asia and Minister responsible for Human Rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, discussed Amnesty's case with the Indian High Commissioner in December. Officials remain in close contact with Amnesty on this matter. In respect of religious freedoms, our High Commission in New Delhi regularly meets minority representatives and runs projects promoting minority rights. Over the last three years, we have worked with local NGOs to bring together people of diverse faiths on social action projects that promote inter-faith tolerance.

### [India: Demonstrations](#)

**28 Jan 2021 | 142851**

#### **Asked by: Jessica Morden**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what representations his Department has made to his Indian counterpart on (a) state-sanctioned acts of violence against protesting Punjabi farmers and (b) the suppression of the right to peaceful protest in that dispute.

#### **Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The Foreign Secretary discussed protests about agricultural reforms with his Indian counterpart during his visit to India in December, whilst making clear that the handling of protests is an internal matter for the Indian authorities. The right to gather lawfully and demonstrate a point of view is common to all democracies. Governments also have the power to enforce law and order if a protest crosses the line into illegality.

### [Topical Questions](#)

**19 Jan 2021 | 687 c771**

#### **Asked by: Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi**

More than 100 Members of this House signed a cross-party letter to the Prime Minister about our anxieties for the peacefully protesting farmers in India, and we eagerly await his response. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is extremely concerning to hear alarming reports of

harassment and intimidation by the authorities there, which have started issuing notices to peaceful protesters, union leaders and human rights activists?

**Answered by: Dominic Raab | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

I understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns. I discussed the protests with Foreign Minister Jaishankar when I visited India in December. Of course, this is a major, Government-led reform that reduces subsidies as part of the liberalisation process, but the hon. Gentleman makes some important points about freedom of protest and sensitivity. Of course, India's politics is very much our politics, but we need to respect its democratic process.

**[India: Human Rights](#)**

**11 Jan 2021 | 131506**

**Asked by: Apsana Begum**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what recent discussions he has with his Indian counterpart on the human rights situation in India and (a) the conditions experienced by political prisoners, (b) the amount of time prisoners are waiting for trials, (c) the ability of human rights monitoring organisations to operate, (d) press freedom, (e) discriminatory laws, (f) labour rights and protections, (g) trade union rights, (h) violence against women and girls, and (i) democratic rights such as freedom of speech and the right to protest.

**Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

We engage with India on the full range of human rights matters. On his visit to India 14-17 December, The Foreign Secretary discussed human rights with the Minister of External Affairs Dr Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. Our High Commission in Delhi works with Union and State Governments and Non-Governmental Organisations to promote human rights by building capacity and sharing expertise. Our projects tackle the drivers of human rights violations in regards to gender equality, media freedom and other FCDO priorities, and encourage the empowerment of minority groups.

**[Press Freedom](#)**

**18 Dec 2020 | 128312**

**Asked by: Imran Ahmad Khan**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps his Department is taking to support freedom of the press in countries listed in the lowest category of the World Press Freedom Index, as compiled by Reporters Without Borders.

**Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

We are working to support media around the world to find sustainable models to work in challenging environments. As the Foreign Secretary affirmed at the World Press Freedom Day Conference on 9 December, the UK will use its G7 presidency to promote media freedom. The

Foreign Secretary, along with the Minister of State responsible for Human Rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, also represented the UK at the virtual Global Conference on Media Freedom in November, where we recommitted members of the Media Freedom Coalition to working together to improve media freedom and the safety of journalists at home and abroad.

Our Overseas Development assistance programmes have included support to independent media in countries listed in the lowest category, such as in Iraq, where the Al-Mirbad radio station provides a vital public service, and Egypt, where we have funded capacity-building activities for local journalists. In Sudan, we are supporting journalists to report on the Covid-19 pandemic accurately and responsibly and are helping senior media leaders to find new models to help media business viability. We have also helped establish the Media Freedom Coalition, jointly co-chaired with Canada, to defend media freedom. The Coalition, whose membership has expanded, has issued statements on situations of concern including Egypt and Belarus. We are supporting the UNESCO Global Media Defence Fund who are providing support to journalists working in challenging situations.

### [Engagements](#)

**09 Dec 2020 | 685 c845**

#### **Asked by: Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi**

Many constituents, especially those emanating from the Punjab and other parts of India, were horrified, as I was, to see footage of water cannon, tear gas and brute force being used against peacefully protesting farmers. However, it was heart-warming to see those very farmers feeding those forces who had been ordered to beat or suppress them. What indomitable spirit—it takes a special kind of people to do that. Will the Prime Minister convey to the Indian Prime Minister our heartfelt anxieties and our hopes for a speedy resolution to the current deadlock? Does he agree that everyone has a fundamental right to peaceful protest?

#### **Answering Member: Boris Johnson | Prime Minister**

Of course. Our view, as the hon. Gentleman knows well, is that we have serious concerns about what is happening between India and Pakistan, but these are pre-eminently matters for those two Governments to settle. I know that he appreciates that point.

### [Jammu and Kashmir: Human Rights](#)

**02 Nov 2020 | 807 c1130**

#### **Asked by: Lord Collins of Highbury**

My Lords, Amnesty International raised particular concerns over the crackdown on civil society and journalists in Kashmir and Jammu. Can the Minister detail what steps the Government have taken to protect press freedom? Have they engaged with the International Federation of Journalists, which has consistently fought for reporting rights in Jammu and Kashmir, as well as globally?

#### **Answered by: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon**

My Lords, I will write to the noble Lord on his final point about formal engagement. As he knows, media freedom and the protection of

journalists is a priority for Her Majesty's Government. We are leading on a coalition with Canada on the specific issue of Amnesty International and its situation in India; I assure the noble Lord that I have raised that directly with the Government of India.

## 4.2 Early Day Motions

### [Farmers' protests in India](#)

**EDM 1584 (session 2019-21)**

**3 March 2021**

**Layla Moran**

That this House expresses its profound concern at the growing number of arrests of Indian farmers protesting controversial privatisation legislation in India; further notes that militarised police violence has repeatedly been used against these peaceful protestors; echoes the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights' call on "the authorities and the protestors for maximum restraint" in the ongoing Indian farmers' protests; draws attention to the petition 'Urge the Indian Government to ensure safety of protestors & press freedom' led by Liberal Democrat Councillor Gurch Singh which has now received more than 115,000 signatures; urges Her Majesty's Government to fulfil the petition's calls by making an official statement setting out the need to ensure the safety of protestors and press freedom in the Indian farmers' protests; calls upon Her Majesty's Government to work together with Indian authorities to ensure the safety of Indian farmers.

### [Criminalisation of dissent in India](#)

**EDM 1278 (session 2019-21)**

**15 December 2020**

**Apsana Begum**

That this House expresses its profound concern at the growing number of arrests in India of human rights defenders, student leaders, feminist activists, Dalit rights campaigners, trade unionists, Opposition politicians, and writers, artists, lawyers, academics and journalists who are critical of Narendra Modi's regime; notes that many of these arrests have been made under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, which owes its origins to colonial-era repressive legislation; further notes that ruling-party leaders have engaged in what many argue to be incendiary hate speech against religious minorities and democratic dissenters throughout the tenure of the present BJP-led government; further notes that militarised police violence has repeatedly been used against peaceful protesters, including farmers currently protesting controversial privatisation bills; further notes that the recent shutdown of the Indian branch of Amnesty International, the world's leading human rights advocacy group, bears witness to the currently perilous state of Indian democracy; stands in solidarity with those incarcerated for raising their voices against the oppressive anti-minority politics of the current regime; and calls upon the UN, its member states and international governments to hold the Indian Government to account, and to subject its violations of basic democratic principles to international scrutiny.

## 5. Further reading

[Reporters without Borders 2020 World press freedom index](#)

[Global Media Defense Fund](#) (Homepage)

[Freedom House Freedom in the World 2021 \(India\)](#)

[Committee to Protect Journalists](#) (Homepage)

[Amnesty International India country page](#)

[Human Rights Watch India country page](#)



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