

Debate Pack

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Effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on religious and ethnic minority communities throughout the world

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1 Religious and ethnic minorities during the Covid-19 pandemic

1.1 Background and summary

On Tuesday 22 June, there will be a debate in Westminster Hall on the Effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on religious and ethnic minority communities throughout the world.

The debate will be led by Jim Shannon MP.

Many religious and ethnic minorities have long been subject to discrimination and campaigns of persecution. It is currently uncertain the extent to which the pandemic has contributed to many of these existing campaigns of violence and discrimination or caused the displacement of peoples.

Both Parliamentarians and the UK Government have both expressed concern about the scale and severity of long-standing abuses of freedom of religion and belief. The Government has previously [raised concerns with respective governments on this issue](#).¹

During the crisis, some groups have been subject to hate speech and acts of violence linked to the pandemic. Data, primarily from the UK, USA and parts of South America also suggests that some ethnic minorities and indigenous communities have not only been more likely to contract Covid-19 during the pandemic but have faced higher rates of mortality once infected with the virus.

This paper briefly sets out the experiences and treatment of religious and ethnic minorities across the world over the past year. It should be emphasised, however, that the impact of the pandemic has primarily been to exacerbate existing inequalities and made the challenge of addressing the needs of some communities harder.

This paper also describes the status of refugees and migrants. While many migrants or refugees are not from religious or ethnic minorities and have left their origin countries for reasons other than persecution and discrimination, there is some overlap between these groups and the challenges they face.

¹ PQ 120057 [[Religious freedom: Coronavirus](#)], 30 November 2020, HC Deb, [26 November 2020](#), c485

1.2 UN Assessments

In November 2020 the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights said that the pandemic had taken a [“disproportionate toll”](#) on marginalised and discriminated groups.

The Commissioner said such communities had been overexposed to the virus because they tend to work in low-paid and precarious work, under protected because of limited access to health care and social protections, and were less able to isolate themselves if they had become infected.²

In August 2020, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination also reported that there was a [significant increase in stigmatization and scapegoating against minorities during the pandemic](#), which often resulted in discriminatory or violent acts.³

The UN Special Rapporteur Freedom on Religion and Belief has also warned that the pandemic has led to an “upsurge in incitement to hatred [and] scapegoating of religious or belief communities,” [including against Christians, Jews and Muslims](#).⁴

Minority groups are also [more likely to live in poverty](#), exacerbating other inequalities.⁵ The World Bank estimates in 2020 that [the Covid-19 induced new poor rose](#) by between 119 and 124 million and in 2021 may increase to between 143 and 163 million.⁶

1.3 Mortality and case numbers

Researchers have [identified health inequalities](#) that have put some ethnic minority communities at a higher risk of contracting Covid-19 and seeing higher rates of excess deaths. Most of this data has come from higher-income states such as the UK and USA.⁷

² UN Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, [Addressing the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on minority ethnic communities](#), 24 November 2020

³ UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, [Statement 3 \(2020\) Prevention of racial discrimination, including early warning and urgent action procedures](#), 4-7 August 2020

⁴ UN Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, [UN expert warns against religious hatred and intolerance during Covid-19 outbreak](#), 22 April 2020

⁵ World Bank, [Everyone equal: Making inclusive growth a priority for ethnic minorities](#), 13 July 2020

⁶ World Bank, [Updated estimates of the impact of Covid-19 on global poverty and the outlook for 2021](#), 11 January 2021

⁷ UK Parliament POST, [Impact of Covid-19 on different ethnic minority groups](#), 19 October 2020; Office for National Statistics, [Why have Black and South Asian people been hit hardest by Covid-19?](#), 14 December 2020; The Lancet, [Ethnicity and clinical outcomes in Covid-19: A systematic review and meta-analysis](#), December 2020

Inequalities contributing to the increased risk include poorer access to healthcare, employment in informal and front-line roles (such as health), living in overcrowded housing, and restricted access to services due to immigration or citizenship status.⁸

For much of the world, data disaggregated by ethnicity is lacking. The NGO Minority Rights has argued the lack of such data for South Asia, for example, is a “glaring gap” which [created a public health risk](#) and has hindered the provision of appropriate healthcare.⁹

Indigenous communities have seen higher death rates, though this may partly reflect a lack of availability in testing. From February to June 2020, the crude fatality rate (meaning the number of deaths amongst diagnosed cases only) for indigenous communities in Mexico [was 65 percent higher than among non-indigenous communities](#).¹⁰ Similar patterns have been reported in Brazil for [indigenous communities and Black Brazilians](#).¹¹

1.4

Access to services, aid and vaccines

Healthcare

Many religious and ethnic minorities often experience barriers in accessing healthcare, which may include Covid-19 testing and treatments. This is because many lack citizenship rights and necessary documentation or experience discrimination and language barriers.¹²

Some countries require people to show ID to access services, which those who are not citizens often lack. For example, it has been estimated that between 23 and 33 percent of Uganda’s population is [unable to access key health and social services](#) as they do not have ID cards.¹³

There have been reported instances of people being unable to access services because of religious discrimination. For example, in 2020 in India some

⁸ Minority Rights, [Lack of disaggregated data a glaring gap in Southeast Asia’s Covid-19 response](#), 20 May 2020; UN, [Address “appalling impact” of Covid-19 on minorities, UN rights chief urges](#), 2 June 2020

⁹ Minority Rights, [Lack of disaggregated data a glaring gap in Southeast Asia’s Covid-19 response](#), 20 May 2020

¹⁰ A.D. Argoty-Pantoja et al in Public Health, [Covid-19 fatality in Mexico’s indigenous population](#), April 2020, pp69-75

¹¹ P. Baqui et al in the Lancet, [Ethnic and religious variations in hospital mortality from Covid-19 in Brazil](#), July 2020

¹² Minority Rights Group International for Reuters, [Covid-19 emergency relief must reach everyone, including minorities and indigenous peoples](#), 24 March 2020; Minority Rights Group International, [Inequality and the impact of Covid-19](#), September 2020

¹³ The Guardian, [Uganda’s ID scheme excludes nearly a third from healthcare, says report](#), 9 June 2021

hospitals were reportedly [denying treatment to Muslims who had not tested negative for Covid-19](#).¹⁴

Indigenous communities have been particularly [vulnerable to the pandemic](#) because of their higher rates of poverty and lack of medical infrastructure.¹⁵ In Brazil, for example, the Federal Government initially vetoed legislation providing additional support to its indigenous communities before being challenged in the country's Supreme Court.¹⁶ In Columbia, the indigenous Wayúu people [struggled to access food and sufficient water](#) during the pandemic, with the virus exacerbating existing inequalities.¹⁷

Access to aid and vaccines

During 2020, there were reports in South Asia that some communities have experienced discrimination when pandemic-related aid was being distributed.

In 2020, some NGOs in Pakistan [reportedly denied food and emergency handouts to Christians and Hindus](#).¹⁸ In Nepal, there were also reports that Dalits, the lowest caste structure in the Hindu system, [had faced discrimination](#) during the distribution of relief materials and medical supplies.¹⁹ It was also reported in April 2020 that some [Muslim aid workers were attacked](#) in India, being accused of spreading the virus.²⁰

Some groups have been subject to additional testing or restrictions during the pandemic. In April 2020, several African states wrote to the Chinese Government to [cease the forced testing and quarantine of Africans living in the country](#). The Chinese Government denied this took place.²¹ The Hazara Shia community in Pakistan also had their [movements and work restricted](#) in one region before any wider regional lockdown was introduced.²²

There are also concerns that marginalised communities may also miss out on Covid-19 vaccinations. For example, in parts of Europe there is a [high degree of vaccine hesitancy](#) amongst Roma communities and a [lack of engagement](#) from governments.²³ Gavi, the vaccine alliance, intends to work with faith-

¹⁴ Anadolu Agency, [India: Hospital retracts ad denying treatment to Muslims](#), 21 April 2020

¹⁵ Forest People, [The impact of Covid-19 on indigenous communities](#), October 2020, section 3.4

¹⁶ CNN, [Brazil's top court backs special protection for indigenous communities \[...\]](#), 10 August 2020

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, [Colombia: Indigenous kids at risk of malnutrition, death](#), 13 August 2020

¹⁸ [Aid to the Church in Need submission to the International Development Committee](#), October 2020

¹⁹ UN Human Rights Council, [Entrenched harms caused by racism over generations has been magnified by Covid-19 \[...\]](#), 12 March 2021

²⁰ The Hindu, [Volunteers distributing relief material attacked](#), 6 April 2020

²¹ Reuters, [Treatment of Africans in southern China sparks diplomatic backlash](#), 16 April 2020

²² Jaffer Mirza for the Institute of Development Studies, [Pakistan's Hazara Shia minority blamed for spread of Covid-19](#), 17 April 2020

²³ Al Jazeera, [Roma mistrust in governments is an obstacle to Covid-19 recovery](#), 1 June 2021; France 24, [Hungary's Roma battle Covid on their own](#), 22 May 2021

based organisations and religious leaders to support the distribution of Covid-19 vaccines.²⁴

The UK Government says it seeks to ensure recipients of UK aid, including minority communities, [are not discriminated against because of their faith](#). It conducts country analysis to identify any potential challenges before the aid is distributed.²⁵

Employment and land rights

Many minorities have been particularly vulnerable to the pandemic because of their employment. For example, in Pakistan many sanitation workers in May 2020 [found themselves with minimal PPE](#) despite working in hospital settings. Around 75 to 80 percent of the sanitation workers are Christian.²⁶

Researchers and NGOs have also argued the pandemic has created a [“perfect storm” for land rights abuses](#). Despite the pandemic, religious minorities in Iran such as the Bahá'ís continued to [experience forced evictions and land confiscation](#).²⁷ In South America, there is particular concern that vulnerable groups are being forced to give up their land, impacting particularly on Black Brazilians and indigenous communities. This is due to the temporary closing of legal and administrative offices because of public health restrictions, and the economic impact of the pandemic on both governments and individuals.²⁸ In Kenya, Minority Rights Group accused the Government of using the cover of the pandemic to continue their campaign to [evict Ogiek communities from the Mau Forest](#).²⁹

On land rights, the UK Government has said it seeks to use UK aid to support protections against forcible evictions, and was “deeply troubl[ed]” by the deterioration in the land rights of religious minorities in Iran and [had called upon the Iranian Government to end the persecution](#).³⁰

1.5

Migrants

While many migrants are not from religious or ethnic minorities, the World Health Organization has said there is [some partial overlap between these](#)

²⁴ PQ 14711 [[Christianity: Oppression](#)], 10 February 2021

²⁵ PQ 90198 [[Overseas aid: Freedom of religion](#)], 21 September 2020; PQ 86615 [[Developing countries: Religion](#)], 24 September 2020

²⁶ Asif Aqeel for the Institute of Development Studies, [Unprotected, unpaid or unrecognised: Christian workers on the frontline \[...\]](#), 28 May 2020

²⁷ Commons Library, [Land rights for religious minorities including Baha'is in Iran](#), 19 April 2021

²⁸ Reuters, [Pandemic upheaval creates “perfect storm” for land rights abuses](#), 16 July 2020

²⁹ Minority Rights Group International, [Kenya flouts African court judgement \[...\]](#), 17 July 2020

³⁰ HC Deb, [22 April 2021](#), c450WH

[groups](#) and that they can experience similar forms of social exclusion.³¹ There is also some suggestion that migrants and ethnic minorities [have both seen higher rates of Covid-19 illness and death](#).³²

The OECD reports that [migrants are at a much higher risk of contracting Covid-19](#) due to the likelihood they inhabit overcrowded housing, work informally, and have reduced access to services and social protection.³³

Many migrant communities have experienced higher rates of Covid-19. For example, in 2020 in Singapore low-wage migrant workers on temporary work visas in dormitory accommodation [had a Covid-19 prevalence of 16.5 percent in a population of 323,000 compared 0.04 percent amongst the 5.4 million Singapore residents](#) living outside the dormitories.³⁴

Migrants are often excluded from social protection systems in both origin and destination countries. For 2020, the UN estimated that [only around 23 percent of migrants have full portability of benefits](#), allowing benefits to be earned and paid across borders. In South Asia, an estimated 0.4 percent of migrants had full benefit portability.³⁵

Migrant workers were also vulnerable to losing their legal status or seeing their wages reduced during the pandemic. For example, in the Dominican Republic more than 150,000 Haitian workers [saw their temporary legal status suspended](#) in response to the pandemic. An estimated 50,000 workers returned to Haiti from March to June 2020.³⁶

1.6

Refugees and displaced peoples

In 2019, the UN estimated that there are around 79.5 million displaced people worldwide, including 26 million refugees.³⁷ People are forced to become refugees for multiple reasons, including economic, environmental and political pressures, in addition to [persecution and discrimination](#).³⁸

The [largest groups of refugees and displaced peoples](#) are from Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Myanmar.³⁹ Their status reflects causes present long before the pandemic began, but overcrowded and

³¹ World Health Organization Europe, [How health systems can address health inequalities linked to migration and ethnicity](#), 2010, Introduction

³² M. Melchior et al, 'Migrant status, ethnicity and Covid-19: More accurate European data are generally needed,' *Clinical Microbiology and Infection*, February 2021, pp160-2

³³ OECD, [What is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on immigrants and their children?](#), October 2020

³⁴ UN, [Asia-Pacific migration report 2020](#), 2020, p171

³⁵ UN, [Asia-Pacific migration report 2020](#), 2020,p135

³⁶ Human Rights Watch, [World report 2021](#), 2021, pp73, 302

³⁷ UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), [Figures at a glance](#), 18 June 2020

³⁸ Open Doors, [The persecution of Christians and global displacement](#), 2017

³⁹ UNHCR, [Refugee statistics](#), accessed 17 June 2021

unhygienic living conditions have [made them particularly vulnerable to the virus](#).⁴⁰

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has argued the pandemic is a “[force multiplier](#),” making the needs of people of concern more acute and complex to address.⁴¹ It says that the [pandemic has increased unemployment and poverty](#) in marginalised communities, impacting on their ability to meet basic needs.⁴²

The International Rescue Committee has also expressed concerned that Covid-19 [threatens refugees camps in Syria, Greece and Bangladesh](#).⁴³ To February 2021, around [49,000 cases have been reported](#) amongst refugees and displaced people in 105 countries, and there have been 446 deaths.⁴⁴ Lack of access to testing means these figures are likely to be underestimates.

The UNHCR states cases of Covid-19 to March 2021 were [lower than expected](#) in the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh. Of the 860,000 estimated refugees, there have been 30,000 tests conducted and 400 cases confirmed. The Agency has run public information campaigns, established isolation centres, and established intensive care units.⁴⁵ However, due to nationwide restrictions some NGOs have [struggled to deliver humanitarian aid](#) to the camps.⁴⁶

In the Middle East and North Africa, [there have been 12,553 confirmed cases of Covid-19](#) amongst the 17.4 million people of concern in the region (to 26 May 2021).⁴⁷

In 2021, the UNHCR has appealed for \$924 million, of which \$455 million will meet the “exceptional needs” of displaced peoples caused by the pandemic.⁴⁸ The UK has [not yet announced spending allocations](#) for 2021/22.⁴⁹ [Previously announced UK funding](#) included contributions to the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for Covid-19 and the Red Cross.⁵⁰

Access to vaccines

The UNHCR has also [called for fair access to Covid-19 vaccines for refugees](#). To 7 April 2021, 153 countries have included refugees in their vaccine

⁴⁰ Doctors without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières, [Iraq: Displaced people extremely vulnerable to Covid-19](#), 13 July 2020

⁴¹ UNHCR, [Consequences of underfunding in 2020](#), August 2020

⁴² UNHCR, [Livelihoods, food and futures: Covid-19 and the displaced](#), accessed 15 June 2021

⁴³ International Rescue Committee, [Covid-19 threatens refugee camps](#), accessed 15 June 2021

⁴⁴ UNHCR, [Global Covid-19 needs](#), February 2021, p1

⁴⁵ UNHCR, [Rohingya refugees and local Bangladeshis benefit from inclusive Covid-19 response](#), 18 March 2021

⁴⁶ Danish Refugee Council, [Myanmar lockdown: Aid trapped in the middle](#), 8 October 2020

⁴⁷ UNHCR, [Covid-19 emergency response update, 1-30 April](#), 26 May 2021

⁴⁸ UNHCR, [Coronavirus outbreak](#), accessed 15 June 2021

⁴⁹ PQ 186214 [[UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#)], 29 April 2021

⁵⁰ PQ 4072 [[Internally displaced people: Health Services](#)], 28 May 2021

strategies, and 20 have begun inoculating them on an equal footing. This includes [Serbia](#), [Nepal](#), [Rwanda](#) and [Jordan](#).⁵¹ [Bangladesh](#) has included Rohingya refugees in its national rollout campaign.⁵²

The Covax initiative, which aims to ensure fair access to Covid-19 vaccines worldwide, in 2021 also intends to reserve an estimated 100 million doses as a [“humanitarian buffer.”](#) This will be used in areas of state conflict, and also to vaccinate groups such as refugees, vulnerable migrants and asylum seekers.⁵³ However, NGOs, pharmaceutical companies and UN agencies have [so far refused to accept liability](#) for any potential lawsuits resulting from the administration of doses.⁵⁴

1.7

Freedom of belief and religion

In some countries, the response to Covid-19 has exacerbated existing religious inequalities and impeded religious freedom. Many of these campaigns against religious freedom are long-standing and are not necessarily a direct result of the pandemic.

In 2021, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom concluded that many Covid-19 restrictions had [“harmed religious minorities”](#) or violated freedom of belief or faith.⁵⁵ The Christian advocacy group Open Doors also said that [persecution of Christians increased during the pandemic](#), being subject to greater violence from militants and increased surveillance by authoritarian governments.⁵⁶

The charity Aid to the Church in Need estimated in 2020 that oppression against vulnerable faith communities [increased in 25 of the 26 countries](#) that it identifies as the most oppressive against belief and religious groups.⁵⁷

During the pandemic, long-standing campaigns involving the destruction and desecration of places of worship have continued, including against [Uyghur mosques and shrines](#) by the Chinese Government and [Hindu temples in Pakistan](#).⁵⁸ In May 2021, 15 people were [killed at a baptism](#) in Burkina Faso.⁵⁹

⁵¹ UNHCR, [UNHCR calls for equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines for refugees](#), 7 April 2021

⁵² UNHCR, [Rohingya refugees and local Bangladeshis benefit from inclusive Covid-19 response](#), 18 March 2021

⁵³ Gavi, [The Covax humanitarian buffer explained](#), 30 March 2021

⁵⁴ New Humanitarian, [Emergency Covid vaccination scheme in legal jeopardy](#), 9 June 2021

⁵⁵ US Commission on Religious Freedom, [Annual report 2021](#), April 2021, p87

⁵⁶ Open Doors, [World watch list report 2021](#), January 2021

⁵⁷ Aid to the Church in Need, [Religious Freedom in the World Report 2021](#), 2021

⁵⁸ The Guardian, [Thousands of Xinjiang mosques destroyed or damaged, report finds](#), 25 September 2020; DW, [Pakistan: Mob torches Hindu temple](#), 31 December 2020

⁵⁹ Reuters, [Armed men kill 15 at baptism in Northern Burkina Faso](#), 19 May 2021

In many countries, religious buildings [have been closed as part of public health measures](#).⁶⁰

In some countries, all communities have been required to cremate people when they die. Until the order was reversed in February 2021, [Muslims in Sri Lanka were unable to bury their dead](#).⁶¹ The UK Government [previously raised concerns](#) about the practice with the Sri Lankan Government.⁶² Exceptions have also been made to such orders—for example, for the [Wayúu people in Colombia](#).⁶³

In August 2020, the UK Government, together with 18 other members of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, [issued a statement](#) calling for states to ensure any restrictions to the right to freedom of religion or belief are “necessary, proportionate, and time-limited to protect public health.”⁶⁴

In January 2021, the UN adopted a resolution [condemning acts or threats of violence](#) against religious sites.⁶⁵

1.8

Stigmatisation and scapegoating

Stigmatisation, hate speech and scapegoating have been reported against many ethnic and religious groups during the pandemic. In April 2020, the World Health Organization emphasised that [“it is not helpful”](#) to profile Covid-19 along racial, religious or ethnic lines.⁶⁶

Several groups have experienced threats following false claims that they have spread or developed the virus. For example, in May 2020 Indian Muslims were [accused of spreading the virus](#) and were violently targeted by some groups as a result.⁶⁷ In March 2020, Muslims in Cambodia were also subject to online hate, [being blamed for bringing the virus into the country](#).⁶⁸ Both Governments subsequently issued statements to reduce tensions.⁶⁹

There have also been related increases in reports of anti-Semitism. Tel Aviv’s Kantor Centre reports that during 2020 Jews and Israelis were [accused of developing and spreading the virus](#) on social media and in Iranian state

⁶⁰ US Commission on Religious Freedom, [The global response to the Coronavirus \[...\]](#), March 2020

⁶¹ BBC News, [Covid-19: Sri Lanka reversed “anti-Muslim” cremation order](#), 26 February 2021

⁶² PQ 138047 [[Sri Lanka: Coronavirus](#)], 19 January 2021

⁶³ World Health Organisation, [Colombia responds to Covid-19 with an intercultural health model](#), 6 November 2020

⁶⁴ PQ HL13550 [[Religious freedom](#)], 9 March 2021; PQ 180496 [[Overseas aid: Religion](#)], 21 April 2021; US Department of State, [Covid-19 and religious minorities pandemic statement](#), 20 August 2020

⁶⁵ UN General Assembly, [Resolution Adopted](#), 75/258, 26 January 2021

⁶⁶ World Health Organization, [Covid-19 virtual press conference](#), 6 April 2020, p6

⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch, [Corona Jihad is only the latest manifestation \[...\]](#), 1 May 2020

⁶⁸ VOA Cambodia, [Linked to viral outbreak, Cambodian Muslims facing backlash](#), 23 March 2020

⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch, [Cambodia: Fight discrimination amid pandemic](#), 30 March 2020; France 24, [Virus misinformation fuels hatred against India’s Muslims](#), 6 May 2020

media.⁷⁰ Some protests against Covid-19 restrictions in Germany also used anti-Semitic imagery.⁷¹

Hate-speech and violence has also been directed against minorities. In June 2020, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights said hate speech in Europe had been primarily directed against refugees, people of Asian origin and Roma communities.⁷² Amnesty International also highlighted [discrimination in Covid-19 related law enforcement](#) in EU states.⁷³

In both 2020 and 2021, the UK Government has raised concerns at the UN on the rise in hate speech and the blaming of certain faiths or belief groups for the pandemic.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Tel Aviv Kantor Center, [Anti-Semitism worldwide](#), 2020, p7

⁷¹ DW, [Ban mock Jewish star at Covid protests, German anti-Semitism czar urges](#), 7 May 2021;

⁷² EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, [Coronavirus pandemic in the EU—fundamental rights implications](#), 30 June 2020

⁷³ Amnesty International, [Policing the pandemic](#), 2020, ch 3

⁷⁴ PQ 180495 [[Religious freedom: Hate crime](#)], 21 April 2021

2

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.

[French Muslims pay heavy price in COVID pandemic](#)

SWI Swissinfo.ch
Caroline Pailliez
15 June 2021

[No let up in persecution of Christians during Covid era](#)

The Citizen (India)
John Dayal
11 June 2021

[This Pandemic Isn't Over](#)

The Atlantic
Jim Downs
9 June 2021

[US expresses concern about violence and discrimination](#)

Times of India
12 May 2021

[How COVID-19 became a cover to reduce refugee rights](#)

The Conversation
Heaven Crawley
10 March 2021

[Latin American women battle shadow pandemic of gender-based violence](#)

The New Humanitarian
Paula Dupraz-Dobias
24 February 2021

[The world faces a pandemic of human rights abuses in the wake of Covid-19](#)

The Guardian
António Guterres
22 February 2021

[Covid is worsening persecution of Christians, reports Open Doors](#)

Church Times
Bel Trew
22 January 2021

[Israel rebuffs WHO vaccine request for Palestinian medics, amid outcry over disparity](#)

The Independent

Bel Trew

8 January 2021

[Religious discrimination is hindering the covid-19 response](#)

The BMJ

Sonia Sarkar

29 June 2020

[LGBTQ inequality and vulnerability in the pandemic](#)

Foreign Policy in Focus

Graeme Reid

17 June 2020

[Coronavirus: five ways some states have used the pandemic to curtail human rights and democracy](#)

The Conversation

Rachel M Gisselquist and Durgesh Solanki

8 December 2020

3

Press releases

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities: UK response

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

3 Jun 2021

Ambassador Neil Bush responds to OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Ambassador Abdrakhmanov, and voices strong UK support for the institution.

Thank you, Madam Chair. Ambassador Abdrakhmanov, the UK welcomes you to the Permanent Council for the first time. We congratulate you on your appointment and thank you for your comprehensive report.

The UK is a strong supporter of your institution, which plays a vital role in early warning and conflict prevention in the case of tensions related to national minorities. We fully support your mandate and your institution's autonomy. We encourage all participating States to fully cooperate with you and your staff to enable you to fulfil this mandate.

We were pleased to hear that in many of your meetings thus far you have encountered a high degree of constructive cooperation and trust in your efforts to resolve national minority issues within and between participating States. As is so often the case in the OSCE, in order to realise the full potential of your institution, participating States must demonstrate political will and good faith engagement with your efforts.

This means not only engaging with you to raise concerns about the actions of others, but also engaging positively with your requests for visits and suggestions and recommendations stemming from them. While we acknowledge that challenges to travel remain due to the ongoing pandemic, it is important that you are able to travel freely throughout the entire OSCE region, including to areas affected by conflict and illegal annexation.

Your report makes clear the broad scope of activities undertaken by your office and the extent to which you have helped participating States to enhance their security through ensuring the full enjoyment of human rights by all people, including those belonging to national minorities.

We are grateful for your reflections on the continued impact of COVID-19 on people belonging to national minorities and we agree with you that the set of recommendations on "streamlining diversity: COVID-19 measures that support social cohesion" remain relevant and timely. You highlighted the particular socio-economic challenges the pandemic posed for people belonging to national minorities and we were interested to hear about the expert research study you initiated in December. In particular, we were

pleased to hear that this study would include an emphasis on gender and that you have held internal discussions on the socio-economic participation of women belonging to national minorities.

We also very much welcome your intention to conduct comprehensive research into the intersectionality between gender and national minorities this year. Women belonging to national minorities can often face multiple and compounding forms of discrimination and it will be highly beneficial to gain a better understanding of the obstacles that they face in ensuring full and equal enjoyment of human rights and realising their full potential.

Taking into account the needs and circumstances of different genders will also help us achieve more effective conflict prevention and more effective programme interventions. We were therefore grateful for the information you provided about the positive impact that your office's support to the Central Asian Education Programme has had on enrolment of girls from national minorities in higher education programmes and the decrease in incidence of early marriage among girls attending schools participating in the programme.

We continue to value the thematic guidelines produced by your office, as well as your events and programmatic work to raise awareness of these guidelines. We look forward to marking with you next week the anniversary of the 1996 Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities. Your focus on digital technologies seems particularly timely and we noted from your report how digitalisation in some of your projects has proved particularly valuable in helping national minority pupils continue their education online during the pandemic. We also appreciate the opportunity to discuss the results of systematic mainstreaming of gender into the recommendations on policing in multi-ethnic societies on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of those recommendations in Autumn.

In conclusion, allow me to thank you and your dedicated team for all your work and wish you all the best in your future endeavours.

[UN Human Rights Council 46: UK statement on freedom of religion and belief](#)

**Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
8 Mar 2021**

The UK's International Human Rights Ambassador delivered this statement during the Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief.

Thank you, Madam President,

We remain deeply concerned about the scale of abuses and violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief: no one should suffer because of their conscience.

We thank the Special Rapporteur for his work over the past five years, and look forward to engaging with him on his report on combatting anti-Muslim hatred, as well as on Christian persecution and other forms of discrimination.

The United Kingdom is home to many thriving religions and beliefs. We reject all forms of intolerance and hate. Internationally, we are concerned by the societal impacts of the pandemic including rising hate speech, misinformation and conspiracy theories which target minority faith communities in different countries.

We are also concerned about actions of governments such as Sri Lanka, where the government's mandatory cremation policy for those deceased due to Covid-19 has impacted Muslim and Christian minorities in particular. We hope this practice will soon cease and we are ready to provide technical support and evidence to counter misinformation.

This year, we will continue to assess the pandemic's impact on human rights.

What steps can we, the international community, take to ensure it does not fuel further global intolerance towards religious and belief minorities?

4

PQs

Israel: Coronavirus

09 Jun 2021 | 10382

Asked by: Julie Elliott

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what discussions he has had with the Israeli government on covid19 vaccinations in that region.

Answering member: James Cleverly | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The British Embassy Tel Aviv and the British Consulate-General Jerusalem are in regular contact with the relevant parties and continue to raise the issue of timely access to vaccines. The Foreign Secretary most recently raised this during his visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories on 26 May.

The UK is committed to global equitable access to effective vaccines as demonstrated by our £548 million contribution to the COVAX Advance Market Commitment (AMC) - the international initiative to support global equitable access to vaccines. We are pleased that the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs) were among the first to benefit from the COVAX scheme with delivery of over 61,000 doses that arrived on 17 March 2021. Since that initial shipment, we are pleased that several further deliveries have arrived in the OPTs, including most recently on 1 June 2021.

Overseas Aid: Religion

21 Apr 2021 | 180496

Asked by: Jim Shannon

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment he has made of the potential effect of proposed reductions in Official Development Assistance on support for marginalised religious or belief communities affected by the covid-19 pandemic.

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

We are continuing to assess the impact of Covid-19 on members of all minority religious and belief communities. At a country level, Ministers and officials regularly raise specific cases of concern, and discuss practices and laws that discriminate on the basis of religion or belief. At a multilateral level, we work within the UN, International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance ('Alliance') and other international organisations to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for all where it is threatened.

The Minister of State responsible for human rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, virtually attended the Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief in Warsaw in November 2020 and reaffirmed the UK's commitment to promoting FoRB, particularly during the pandemic. In August 2020, we issued a joint statement with the Alliance calling for states to ensure that any restrictions to the right to freedom of religion or belief are necessary, proportionate and time-limited to protect public health.

FCDO Ministers are currently working with officials to finalise ODA budget allocations for 2021/22. Final decisions have not yet been made, including on individual programmes.

Religious Freedom

09 Mar 2021 | HL13551

Asked by: The Lord Bishop of Worcester

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance established by the government of the United States.

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

The UK is a founder and active member of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance ('Alliance'), which was established in February 2020.

The Alliance is a network of countries committed to the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). As the Minister of State responsible for Human Rights, I represented the UK at the first Ministers' Forum of the Alliance in November 2020. Following her appointment in December 2020, the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for FoRB, Fiona Bruce MP, represents the UK at meetings of the Alliance. We use our membership to coordinate advocacy with other states to raise awareness of cases of particular concern and advocate for the rights of individuals being discriminated against or persecuted for their faith or belief. Since its launch, the Alliance has increased its membership from 27 to 32 countries. In August 2020, the UK joined a statement (<https://www.state.gov/covid-19-and-religious-minorities-pandemic-statement/>) by the Alliance which recognised the impact of Covid-19 on minority and religious belief communities and called for the full respect for FoRB during the pandemic.

Christianity: Oppression

10 Feb 2021 | 147111

Asked by: Andrew Rosindell

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps his Department is taking to ensure that Christians receive equal access to vaccines and healthcare in countries or regions where they face persecution.

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

The UK is committed to rapid equitable access to safe and effective vaccines. The UK has committed £548 million to the COVAX Advanced Market Commitment (AMC) - the international initiative to support global equitable access to vaccines. Through match funding, the commitment encouraged other donors to commit \$1 billion. Our commitment will contribute to the supply of at least 1.3 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines in 2021 for 92 developing countries. First COVAX deliveries are anticipated to begin at the end of February. Gavi and its alliance partners plan to work with faith-based organisations and religious leaders to provide accurate and transparent information on, and encourage the distribution and uptake of, COVID19 vaccines. We continue to assess the impact of Covid-19 on human rights globally, including Christians and members of minority religious and belief communities facing persecution.

On 16 November 2020, the Minister of State responsible for Human Rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, virtually attended the Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Warsaw and reaffirmed the UK's commitment to promoting FoRB, particularly during the pandemic. We will continue working with our partners to support global efforts to combat the outbreak of Covid-19 and its effects on the most vulnerable, including those from religious minorities.

Religious Freedom: Christianity

28 Jan 2021 | 143052

Asked by: Preet Kaur Gill

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what recent assessment he has made of the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on the persecution of Christians overseas.

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

The UK remains deeply concerned about the severity and scale of violations and abuses of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in many parts of the world. The UK is committed to defending FoRB for all, and promoting respect

between different religious and non-religious communities. We continue to assess the impact of Covid-19 on human rights globally, including members of minority religious and belief communities. We are concerned by the secondary effects of the pandemic, including incidents of hate speech, reports that some Christian communities have been denied access to aid, and the rise in conspiracy theories that certain faiths or beliefs are to blame for the pandemic. The UK will continue to refute these divisive and harmful claims. On 16 November 2020, the Minister of State for Human Rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, virtually attended the Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief in Warsaw, where he reaffirmed the UK's commitment to promoting FoRB, particularly during the pandemic.

In 2019, the Bishop of Truro released a report commissioned by the then FCO looking into FCO support for persecuted Christians, with recommendations to improve the lives of people persecuted for their religion, faith or belief. Of the 22 recommendations, we have fully delivered 10, made good progress on a further 8, and we are confident that all 22 will be delivered by the time of the independent review in 2022. On 20 December 2020, the Prime Minister reaffirmed his commitment to FoRB by appointing Fiona Bruce MP as his Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief. Mrs Bruce will work with ministers, officials and others to deliver the Government's goal of seeing everyone, everywhere able to have and practise a faith or belief, or not to do so, in accordance with their conscience.

Coronavirus: Disease Control 16 Sep 2020 | 86616 Asked by: Lyn Brown To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment he has made of the extent of persecution of religious minorities within the covid-19 pandemic response in (a) Nigeria, (b) India, (c) Bangladesh, (d) Somalia, (e) China, (f) Myanmar, (g) the Gulf region and (h) other countries. Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office We are continuing to assess the impact of COVID-19 on minority religious and belief communities around the world. We are deeply concerned by incidents of hate speech targeting minority religious and belief groups, including the rise in conspiracy theories that certain faiths or beliefs are to blame for coronavirus. Such incidents are unacceptable, and the UK will continue to refute these divisive and harmful claims. We are also concerned by reports that some minority communities have been denied access to aid and information. As part of our ongoing work to promote Freedom of Religion or Belief for all, we have issued statements calling for states to ensure that any restrictions to the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief are necessary, proportionate and time limited to protect public health. The Minister for Human Rights, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, also urged states to take steps to mitigate the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of society, including religious and belief minorities, during the UK's closing statement at the 44th session of the UN Human Rights Council.

Christianity: Oppression

27 Jan 2021 | 139090

Asked by: Preet Kaur Gill

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment his Department has made of the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on the number of Christians at risk of religious persecution in countries around the world.

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

The UK remains deeply concerned about the severity and scale of violations and abuses of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in many parts of the world. The UK is committed to defending FoRB for all, and promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities. Where we have concerns, we raise them directly with governments, including at ministerial level. In 2019, the Bishop of Truro released a report commissioned by the then FCO with recommendations to improve the lives of people persecuted for their religion, faith or belief. Of the 22 recommendations, we have fully delivered 10, made good progress on a further 8, and we are confident that all 22 will be delivered by the time of the independent review in 2022.

The Minister responsible for Human Rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, has underlined the UK's commitment to FoRB, including in November 2020 at the Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Ministers' Forum of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. On 20 December 2020, the Prime Minister appointed Fiona Bruce, MP for Congleton, as his Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief. Mrs Bruce will work with ministers, officials and others to deliver the Government's goal of seeing everyone, everywhere able to have and practise a faith, belief, or no religious belief, in accordance with their conscience.

Religious Freedom: Coronavirus

30 Nov 2020 | 120057

Asked by: Brendan O'Hara

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment he has made of the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on levels of persecution of (a) women and girls from minority faith communities and (b) religious communities around the world.

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

The UK remains deeply concerned by the severity and scale of violations and abuses of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in many parts of the world. Defending the right to FoRB for all is a priority for the Foreign, Commonwealth

and Development Office. We continue to assess the impact of COVID-19 on human rights globally, including members of all minority religious and belief communities. We recognise that women and girls from religious minorities can often suffer because of both their gender and their faith. That is why we ensure our human rights policy work considers the intersectionality of human rights, for example the importance of addressing the specific vulnerabilities experienced by women and girls from religious minority communities. We are concerned by the secondary effects of the pandemic, including incidents of hate speech; reports that some Christian communities have been denied access to aid and, and the rise in conspiracy theories that certain faiths or beliefs are to blame for the pandemic. The UK will continue to refute these divisive and harmful claims.

The UK has called for states to ensure that any restrictions put in place to protect public health, including the right to FoRB, are necessary, proportionate and time-limited. The Minister of State for Human Rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, urged states to take steps to mitigate the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of society, including religious and belief minorities, during the UK's closing statement at the 44th session of the UN Human Rights Council in July. On 16 November, Lord Ahmad virtually attended the Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief in Warsaw where he reaffirmed the UK's commitment to promoting FoRB within the pandemic.

Christianity: Human Rights

16 Nov 2020 | 113256

Asked by: Abena Oppong-Asare

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps his Department will take to safeguard the human rights of Christians overseas made vulnerable by the covid-19 pandemic.

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

The UK remains deeply concerned by the severity and scale of violations and abuses of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in many parts of the world. Defending the right to FoRB for all is a priority for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. We continue to assess the impact of COVID-19 on human rights globally, including members of all minority religious and belief communities. We are concerned by the secondary effects of the pandemic, including incidents of hate speech. We are also concerned by the rise in conspiracy theories that certain faiths or beliefs are to blame for the pandemic, and reports that some Christian communities have been denied access to aid and information. The UK will continue to refute these divisive and harmful claims.

The UK has called for states to ensure that any restrictions put in place to protect public health, including the right to FoRB, are necessary, proportionate and time-limited. The Minister of State for Human Rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, urged states to take steps to mitigate the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of society, including religious and belief minorities, during the UK's closing statement at the 44th session of the UN Human Rights Council in July.

Covid-19: Foreign Aid

11 Nov 2020 | 807 c1025

Asked by: The Lord Bishop of Winchester

My Lords, protecting freedom of religion or belief remains a pertinent issue in the developing world when more than 80% of the world's population identify with a religion or belief system. My diocese has historic links with the Church of the Province of Myanmar, and during the pandemic many of its clergy have been providing volunteer support in understaffed hospitals. Can the Minister assure the House that, despite the almost £3 billion cut in the UK's foreign aid budget, Her Majesty's Government will continue to prioritise international freedom of religion and belief and recognise the contribution of religious groups in the development and support of their communities, particularly in times of crisis?

Answered by: Baroness Sugg

My Lords, I assure the right reverend Prelate that we are indeed committed to continuing to support the freedom of religion and belief around the world. We will also continue to work with and alongside faith groups. I agree with him that they have been incredible in their response to Covid-19. They are among the first to respond and can play an effective role in bringing about the behaviour change essential to slowing the spread of Covid and reducing infection and illness.

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Previous debates

[Government Support for NGOs and Churches in Developing Nations: Covid-19](#)

25 March 2021 | 691 cc473-92WH

[Covid-19: Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)

26 November 2020 | 684 cc468-89WH

[Refugee Communities: Covid-19](#)

12 November 2020 | 683 cc1099-128

[Covid-19: Refugee Camps](#)

20 May 2020 | 803 cc1100-2

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Further reading

Commons Library Briefing Papers

[Coronavirus: international dimensions](#), Commons Library Briefing Paper, CBP 8952, 2 June 2021

[Government support for non-governmental organisations and churches in developing nations during the covid-19 pandemic](#), Commons Library Debate Pack, CDP-2021-0050, 23 March 2021

[Effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on refugee communities](#), Commons Library Debate Pack, CDP-2020-0134, 10 March 2021

[Effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), Commons Library Debate Pack, CDP-2020-0146, 23 November 2020

General reading list

[Foreign Affairs Committee Inquiry on Tech and the future of UK foreign policy](#)
Written evidence from Open Doors UK & Ireland (TFP0019), 9 June 2021

[2021 Report on International Religious Freedom](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 9 June 2021

Judith Bueno de Mesquita et al, [Human Rights Dimensions of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Background Paper 11](#), Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, May 2021

[United States Commission on International Religious Freedom: Annual Report 2021](#), United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 21 April 2021

[Global Analysis 2020](#), Front Line Defenders, 9 Feb 2021

Piotr Mazurkiewicz, [Religious Freedom in the Time of the Pandemic](#), MDPI, 3 February 2021

[Inequality and the impact of Covid-19: How discrimination is shaping the experiences of minorities and indigenous peoples during the pandemic](#), Minority Rights Group International, 10 September 2020

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