



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

Foreign Secretary William Hague

Speech at the UN Human Rights Council

Monday 28th February 2011

Geneva



Summary:

On Libya

- *The unanimous response to the crisis in Libya, here in the Human Rights Council and at the UN Security Council, was remarkable. The international community came together in a way which it has not done before, setting aside differences in the face of a challenge to the very notion of what we commonly and instinctively regard as the basic rights of humankind.*
- *Together we have signalled that crimes will not be condoned, will not go unpunished and will not be forgotten. This is a warning to anyone contemplating violations of human rights in Libya or any other country: stay your hand. There will be a day of reckoning and the reach of international justice can be long. We must now maintain the momentum we have attained to ensure that there can be no impunity for crimes committed in Libya and to help bring about an immediate end to the violence.*

On the wider region

- *It is a moment of great opportunity in the Middle East. If change and development can be achieved peacefully, it will be the greatest advance in world affairs since Central and Eastern Europe changed so dramatically twenty years ago and many of their countries entered the European Union. If instead violence takes hold, the risks for human rights and international security will be grave.*
- *We must support those working peacefully for more open societies and economic reform in the Middle East, so that in the months to come we see better observance of human rights across the region.*



Mr President, Madam High Commissioner, it is a privilege to address the Council and to follow the distinguished speakers we have heard today.

The duty of all states to promote and protect human rights is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in subsequent treaties and in the founding resolution of this Council.

The British government takes these responsibilities extremely seriously. It is in our DNA as a democratic nation to believe in the universality and indivisibility of human rights, to desire to see the same rights extended to the citizens of other nations, and to support that through our international relations. As I have often said, it is not in our character as a nation to have a foreign policy without a conscience.

We consider that all men and women in all places are born, in the words of one great philosopher, "with a title to perfect freedom". We regard political and economic liberty as the foundation stone of stable and prosperous societies. It is for these reasons that we identify so strongly with the aspirations of people, wherever they live, to lead free and dignified lives.

So we have pledged to the British people:

- that our foreign policy will always have consistent support for human rights and poverty reduction at its irreducible core;



- that we will strive to be a powerful example of a country that upholds these rights, judging ourselves by the highest standards and taking corrective action where we fall short;
- that we will raise our concerns about human rights wherever and whenever they arise, working with the grain of other societies;
- that we will strengthen the institutional capacity of British government to promote human rights;
- and that we will be an active member of international institutions such as this Council. For it is only through collective action that we can hold nations to account and protect the weak and vulnerable. This collective action is the defining purpose of the UN Human Rights Council, and is why we have assembled today.

We do so against the backdrop of momentous change in Egypt and Tunisia, calls for reform and economic development in many other countries of the Middle East, and unchecked and unacceptable violence in Libya.

Last week the Council spoke with one voice to affirm the universal rights of people in Libya and to condemn the gross and systematic violations of those rights by the Libyan authorities, including the use of heavy weaponry against



civilians, the deaths of women and children and cold-blooded incitement to violence.

The resolution we agreed, announcing an independent, international commission of inquiry for Libya, shows the Council working as it was intended to do.

Indeed the unanimous response to the crisis in Libya here in the Human Rights Council and at the UN Security Council is nothing short of remarkable. The international community came together in a way which it has not done before, setting aside differences in the face of a challenge to the very notion of what we instinctively regard as the basic rights of humankind: the right to be free from terror and oppression, the right to life, and the right to raise and express views without the dread of violent retribution.

Together we have signalled that crimes will not be condoned, will not go unpunished and will not be forgotten. This is a warning to anyone contemplating the abuse of human rights in Libya or any other country: stay your hand. There will be a day of reckoning and the reach of international justice can be long.

We must now maintain the momentum we have attained to ensure that there can be no impunity for crimes committed in Libya and to help bring about an immediate end to the violence.



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Mr President, no Member State has ever been suspended from the Council before and it is not a decision that we should take lightly. However, this is the time for us to show that we utterly condemn the actions of the Libyan government. A regime that has failed so shamefully in its responsibility to its people, and that has been referred to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, should not be allowed to sit on the Human Rights Council. We urge our fellow UN Member States to support the draft General Assembly Resolution that will be debated in New York this week.

We must also be vigilant about the humanitarian crisis developing in Libya. The full scale of the need is not yet clear. But where there is need and where we can meet that need Britain will act and Britain's Department for International Development is already on the ground in neighbouring countries and is poised to assist.

Mr President,

Historic events are unfolding in the Middle East. Millions of citizens are demanding their rights and looking to the international community for support.

We have a responsibility to encourage governments to meet the legitimate demands of the people and, where necessary, to protect the rights of the people.



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

It is a moment of great opportunity in the Middle East. If change and development can be achieved peacefully, it will be the greatest advance in world affairs since Central and Eastern Europe changed so dramatically twenty years ago and many of their countries entered the European Union. If instead violence takes hold, the risks for human rights and international security will be grave.

We must support those working peacefully for more open societies and economic reform in the Middle East, so that in the months to come we see better observance of human rights across the region. This should include a particular emphasis on the economic and social empowerment of women.

Respect for human rights rests on foundations that have to be built over time: strong institutions, responsible and accountable government, a free press, the rule of law, and equal rights for men and women. The UK stands ready to lend its support and expertise to those countries looking to develop in this way.

I thank the High Commissioner for her tireless work in this area, in particular her prompt dispatch of a rapid reaction team to Tunisia and her commitment to send a human rights mission to Egypt. I would also like to commend the Government of Tunisia for pledging to sign major UN human rights treaties and the Egyptian Government's commitment to oversee the transition to civilian democratic governance. Both have made important steps in their



reform programmes, but there is a vast amount still to do. The expectations of the Tunisian and Egyptian people are high. Momentum on reform needs to be maintained so people know their Governments are serious about change.

During this time of unrest it is important that that the Human Rights Council shows strong leadership, making it clear that human rights abuses are unacceptable, no matter the context.

We believe three things are necessary for the Council to operate effectively now and in the future.

First, the Council should use independent experts and structures, and work closely with civil society and national human rights institutions.

Secondly, we should maintain constructive dialogue to help meet our obligations, which is why the Universal Periodic Review has the potential to be such a valuable process.

And thirdly, where States fail to meet these obligations, the UN, including this Council, should act to address violations as they occur. We will continue to champion the independence of the OHCHR so that you, Madam High Commissioner, and your office, are able to continue your valuable work.



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

We all have a common interest in a Council better able to fulfil its mandate and to champion the rights and freedoms on which our collective security and mutual prosperity depend, in the years to come. Only an effective Human Rights Council will have credibility with the people whose rights we as States are obliged to protect, and will be able to rise to the challenge of the extraordinary times in which we are living.

Thank you Mr President, Madam High Commissioner.

1,340 words