



International Human Rights Day – Backbench Business Debate December 2022

International Human Rights Day is an opportunity to reflect on the progress made over the last year on human rights as well as an opportunity to shine a light on burning injustices that remain. This briefing covers a selection of priority issues for Amnesty International UK including our Annual Write for Rights campaign cases and human rights concerns in countries from Iran to Ukraine.

Write for Rights - For over 20 years, Amnesty International's 'Write for Rights' campaign has transformed the lives of people whose rights have been violated. Millions of people from all over the world have taken part – sending messages of hope to those whose rights have been abused and calling on those in authority to stop these abuses. From all the letters written, tweets sent and petitions signed, individuals have been released, abusers have been brought to justice and people in prison treated more humanely. Reflecting the growing global threat to the right to protest—Write for Rights 2022 is campaigning for individuals who have paid a great price for speaking out. **We urge you to raise these cases with the UK government and ask them to urge their counterparts to release these individuals.**

- **Chow Hang-tung (Hong Kong)** - Chow Hang-tung is a courageous human rights lawyer and activist. On 4 June 2021, Chow Hang-tung asked people on social media to light candles in memory of the protestors killed in the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown. Chow Hang-tung was arrested for daring to commemorate their lives. Now she is serving a 22-month prison sentence for her activism. Furthermore, she faces further imprisonment for allegedly endangering national security through her peaceful actions.
- **Aleksandra (Sasha) Skochilenko (Russia)** - Aleksandra (or Sasha for short) fills her life with art and music, playing all sorts of musical instruments. On 31 March 2022, Aleksandra peacefully protested against Russia's invasion of Ukraine. She replaced price tags in a local supermarket in Saint Petersburg with small paper labels containing facts about the invasion. Aleksandra was arrested and charged for her peaceful action. She has been held in detention ever since, in appalling conditions.
- **Dorgelesse Nguessan (Cameroon)** - Two years ago, Dorgelesse was busy running her hairdressing business and supporting her family. She had never attended a protest. In September 2020, concerns about the state of Cameroon's economy led her to protest for the first time. During the peaceful demonstrations, Dorgelesse was arrested. She was charged with 'insurrection, assembly, meetings and public demonstrations' and sentenced to five years in prison. She is desperate to be reunited with her family.
- **Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara (Cuba)** - Luis Manuel is a self-taught Black Cuban artist. He loves to paint, dance and wear the colour pink. On 11 July 2021, Luis Manuel posted a video online, saying he would be joining one of the largest demonstrations Cuba had seen in decades. Luis Manuel was arrested and taken to Guanajay maximum security prison, where he remains to this day. In prison, Luis Manuel's health is declining, and he needs proper care.

Iran - The Iranian authorities' deadly repression of the ongoing popular uprising in Iran, which erupted after the death in custody of Mahsa (Zhin) Amini on 16 September 2022, is the latest in the cycle of violent attacks waged by the authorities against people expressing their legitimate grievances since December 2017. [We have consistently documented crimes](#) under international law and other serious human rights violations committed by the Iranian authorities in the context of protests, including unlawful killings following unwarranted use of lethal force, mass arbitrary arrests and detentions, enforced disappearances, torture and other ill-treatment, and the sentencing of individuals to lengthy prison terms or death following grossly unfair trials. The Iranian authorities have ignored repeated calls by the international community to open criminal investigations into such crimes. Instead, they have sought to destroy evidence of their crimes while persecuting survivors and victims' relatives calling for truth, justice and reparation. We welcome the recent decision of the Human Rights Council to establish a fact-finding mission to investigate human rights violations in Iran related to the protests, especially with respect to women and children. **The UK government played a leading role in securing this resolution and we urge them to continue to work with other states to ensure that the mandate is made operational and sufficiently resourced without delay and call upon the Iranian authorities to cooperate fully with the mission and allow unhindered access to the country.**

Bring home arbitrarily detained British Nationals as a priority - Morad Tahbaz, Mehran Raouf and Alaa Abd el-Fattah are three British nationals currently arbitrarily detained abroad. They are all prisoners of conscience and should be immediately and unconditionally released. [Morad](#) has been arbitrarily detained in Iran for over four years: he is serving an unjust 10-year sentence for spying charges in connection with his conservation work and (iii) he suffers from multiple underlying health conditions and is a cancer patient.

[Mehran Raouf](#) continues to be arbitrarily detained in Evin prison, Iran. He was arrested on 16 October 2020 and is serving a 10-year prison sentence. He has been held in prolonged solitary confinement for months at a time, in violation of the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment.

[Alaa Abd el-Fattah](#) also remains arbitrarily detained in Egypt. On 17 November 2022, Alaa's family were finally permitted access to Alaa in prison for the first time since 24 October 2022. While his hunger strike has ended, during the visit the family were told of the horrific ordeal that Alaa had faced during that time. The family have stated that Alaa will have no choice but to resume his hunger strike imminently if there continues to be no real movement on his case. We remain deeply concerned of the impact of seven months of a hunger strike on Alaa's physical and mental condition. We welcome that Parliamentarians across the House have raised Alaa's case. In addition we also welcome that Prime Minister Rishi Sunak raised Alaa's case during his visit to Egypt for COP27, however, the UK government have failed to act with sufficient urgency on this case. With COP27 over, it's more important than ever that Egypt's cruel treatment of Alaa is robustly challenged and that he's spared any further suffering. **We urge the Prime Minister to insist on UK consular access to Alaa to check on his perilous condition and to ascertain what independent medical care he needs. The Government must also conduct an urgent human rights impact assessment of its trade, security and other dealings with Egypt in light of the appalling mistreatment of Alaa and other human rights violations to ensure that no further harm is caused by existing UK-Egyptian agreements.**

Furthermore, the UK government should develop a clear plan for securing the immediate and unconditional release of British nationals arbitrarily detained abroad; and commit to always assuring Cabinet level meetings with family members here in the UK.

Qatar -With the eyes of the world on Qatar during the World Cup, the job of protecting migrant workers from exploitation is only half done, while that of compensating those who have suffered abuses has barely started. Progress must not grind to a halt once the World Cup leaves Doha. Migrant workers on both World Cup and non-World Cup related projects, particularly in the domestic and security sectors, continue to be subjected to conditions that amount to forced labour, with domestic workers still typically working between 14 and 18 hours a day without a weekly day off, isolated in private homes. In May 2022, Amnesty and a coalition of organisations launched a campaign calling on Qatar and FIFA to establish a comprehensive remediation programme for the hundreds of thousands of workers who faced abuses such as illegal recruitment fees, unpaid wages, injury and, in the worst cases, death. But the treatment of migrant workers [is just one of a range of violations that make up the state's troubling human rights record](#). Qatar's authorities repress freedom of expression, freedom of the press and freedom of association; unfair trials remain concerning; women continue to face discrimination in law and practice; and laws continue to discriminate against LGBT individuals. We urge the UK government to continue to press for progress on human rights abuses across the board in Qatar.

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories – In February 2022 Amnesty International published a [report](#) concluding, for the first time, that Israel is committing the crime of apartheid against Palestinians. Other international, Israeli and Palestinian organisations have previously drawn similar conclusions, including [Human Rights Watch](#), [B'Tselem](#), [Yesh Din](#), [Al Mezan](#) and others, as have several Israeli politicians¹.

Under international law apartheid is defined as systematic discrimination maintained by inhumane acts. Massive seizures of Palestinian land and property, unlawful killings, the forcible transfer of Palestinian people from their land, drastic movement restrictions, and the denial of nationality and citizenship to Palestinians are all components of a system amounting to apartheid under international law. This system has become increasingly violent and oppressive over the past year – in the West Bank, Israeli forces have [killed 127 Palestinians](#) since January 2022 and injured hundreds more, and there has also been a surge in assaults and violence against Palestinians by state-backed settlers. Forced evictions and home demolitions have also soared and, [as recognised by the UN](#), also constitute part of the system of apartheid. **The UK government must ensure Israel faces consequences for its serious human rights violations against Palestinians, including through: Banning the trade in settlement goods, which incentivise and legitimise illegal settlement construction; prohibiting the export of machinery repeatedly used in committing human rights abuses, for example, JCB backhoe loaders; supporting all international accountability mechanisms investigating crimes under international law in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, in particular the International Criminal Court investigation and the UN Commission of Inquiry.**

¹ See for example [op-ed from former Israeli Attorney General Michael Ben-Yair](#); [op-ed from former Israeli Environment Minister Yossi Sarid](#); [op-ed by former Israeli Education Minister Shulamit Aloni](#); remarks by former Israeli Ambassador to South Africa Alon Liel to a [Jerusalem conference in 2013](#)

China/Hong Kong - The human rights situation across China has continued to deteriorate.

Human rights lawyers and activists have reported harassment and intimidation; unfair trials; arbitrary, incommunicado and lengthy detention; and torture and other ill-treatment for simply exercising their right to freedom of expression and other human rights. The government's campaign of political indoctrination, arbitrary mass detention, torture and forced cultural assimilation against Muslims living in Xinjiang persists with thousands of Uyghur children separated from their parents. Despite the findings of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights that crimes against humanity may have occurred, the UN Human Rights Council in October voted against adopting a decision to discuss the human rights situation in Xinjiang. Confirmation in October of Xi Jinping's third term General Secretary of the Communist Party of China was an ominous moment not only for the millions of Chinese citizens who have suffered grave human rights violations under his rule, but also for people around the world who feel the impact of the Chinese government's repression including the forcible repatriation of Uyghurs overseas.

Since 2020, the Hong Kong government has been using colonial-era sedition charges alongside the repressive Beijing-imposed National Security Law to stamp out dissent. People charged with sedition have faced some of the same draconian measures as those targeted under the National Security Law. In July, the UN Human Rights Committee called for the repeal of sedition offences and to end their use to suppress criticism or dissent. **The UK Government must continue to use all appropriate means bilaterally and multilaterally to pressure the Governments of China and Hong Kong to halt persistent crimes under international law and bring suspected perpetrators to account; to demonstrate solidarity with human rights activists; and help strengthen the resilience of local civil society organisations.**

Ukraine - On 24th of February, Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine, with troops crossing the border and explosions in multiple cities including Kyiv. Russia's invasion seeks to depose its lawfully elected government, and is having a massive impact on civilians' lives, safety and well-being. Its acts cannot be justified on any of the grounds that Russia has offered. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has triggered a massive human rights, humanitarian, and displacement crisis that has the makings of the worst such catastrophe in recent European history. On the 28th November, the [UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights \(OHCHR\)](#) announced it had recorded 17,023 civilian casualties in the country (6,655 killed and 10,368 injured) since the beginning of Russia's armed attack on the country. The Ukraine conflict has seen crimes under international law committed on a large scale. Since the invasion began, Amnesty International has been documenting the escalation in violations of humanitarian and human rights law. Russia continues to deploy [indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas](#). Amnesty has conducted on-the-ground [investigations](#) and gathered testimonies across the towns of Borodyanka, Bucha, Andriivka, Zdvyzhivka and Vorzel. In [Kharkiv](#) we documented war crimes by Russian forces against civilians. There are also allegations that sexual violence within areas controlled by Russian forces is rampant and widespread, conducive to conflict-related sexual [violence](#).

Amnesty calls for all perpetrators, from all sides of the conflict, to be brought to justice through independent, impartial, and fair trials for all crimes under international law, including the crime of aggression. The rights of victims of crimes under international law must be at the forefront of investigations and prosecutions, and victims must be able to fully realise their rights to truth, justice, and reparations. **We are calling on the UK Government to help deliver justice in Ukraine, by further bolstering international justice mechanisms to hold perpetrators of all international crimes to account. Victims of all war crimes deserve justice.** Without exception and regardless of who the victims and perpetrators are. By supporting an over-arching foreign policy that identifies a consistent and comprehensive approach to human rights and international justice, the UK can help deliver justice for Ukraine, and help prevent the repetition of atrocities elsewhere

Human Rights Defenders strategy - We are urging the UK to commit to developing a well-resourced, gender sensitive, cross-departmental strategy to expand civil society space and support and protect Human Rights Defenders worldwide. Civil society space is being restricted and Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) oppressed in every region of the world at unprecedented levels. New laws which impose onerous registration requirements, label legitimate organisations as ‘foreign agents’ and restrict access to funding (amongst other things) have become commonplace. At the same time HRDs face a surge in attacks and repression, with at least 358 people murdered in 2021 because of their work defending rights. At the G7 meeting in 2022 and in its 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy the UK committed to promote open societies and work with HRDs as a priority. Civil society organisations and HRDs are critical partners in achieving sustainable progress worldwide on UK priorities such as the promotion of human rights, sustainable development, climate change, strengthening the multi-lateral system and others. However, despite this reality the UK’s commitments at the G7 and in the Integrated Review have not translated into any concrete change.