



Eighth Report
from the

Foreign Affairs Committee

Session 2000-2001

Human Rights Annual Report 2000: Follow-up to Government Response

Response of the Secretary of State for
Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

*Presented to Parliament
by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
by Command of Her Majesty
July 2001*

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EIGHTH REPORT FROM THE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

SESSION 2000-2001

HUMAN RIGHTS ANNUAL REPORT 2000: FOLLOW-UP TO GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

RESPONSE OF THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Introduction

1. The Government welcomes the continuing constructive dialogue with the Foreign Affairs Committee on the FCO's Annual Report on Human Rights 2000. The Government remains committed to promoting human rights and welcomes Parliament's interest in its work.

2. This Command Paper sets out the Government's detailed replies to the Committee's recommendations in its follow-up to the response by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. Unless otherwise indicated, references are to paragraphs in the Foreign Affairs Committee Report.

Given that the Government response to our Report on the Human Rights Annual Report 2000 appears to be based on a number of misunderstandings, we continue to recommend that information on a country-by-country basis be included in future editions of the annual report on every country where there are significant grounds for concern about human rights, concentrating on action taken by the United Kingdom Government and its effectiveness. (Recommendation (a) paragraph 8)

We recommend that future editions of the annual report should include a breakdown of expenditure over the previous financial year through the HRPF and the Conflict Prevention Funds. (Recommendation (b) paragraph 10)

3. The Government regrets that the Committee considered that the FCO's response of 4 April 2001 was based on misunderstandings and welcomes the clarification provided in its Eighth Report.

4. The Government wishes to offer the Committee a more detailed explanation of its continued belief that a thematic rather than a country-by-country approach is the best way to cover a wide range of issues and countries in a readable, accessible and coherent way.

5. The Committee recommends the inclusion of information on "every country where there are significant grounds for concern about human rights". It would be difficult and controversial to define "significant" in this context. For example, Botswana generally has a good human rights record, but the Government has concerns about freedom of expression there, as it does about the retention of the death penalty. The current thematic approach enables the Government to mention Botswana in relevant chapters, without appearing to criticise its overall record on human rights, which would not in our view be justified.

6. In addition, any country-by-country approach (whatever the criteria used) would carry a double risk. Countries listed might be less willing to engage with the UK in critical dialogue; while countries not listed might become complacent and less amenable to UK efforts on human rights issues.

7. The Government is fully committed to providing the Committee with as much

information as possible. As last year, the 2001 Report will include a record of each country's ratification of core UN Human Rights instruments and an overview of global campaigns the Government has initiated or participated in to increase ratifications. In accordance with the Committee's recommendation, the Government will also provide a breakdown of the activities of the Human Rights Project Fund and the Global Conflict Prevention Fund.

8. Human rights related work extends well beyond the activities financed from these two funds. Other FCO budgets, for example, are used to fund training for journalists, which frequently includes a human rights element, although it would be difficult to express this as a percentage of an individual project. Including other Government Departments' activities would be as complex. For example, human rights considerations are relevant to almost all of the work of the Department for International Development (DfID). The Ministry of Defence runs a number of defence diplomacy programmes designed to improve human rights performance in armed forces. Over the past year, the Department for Education and Employment has led UK Government efforts to promote and implement core labour standards. The Department for Trade and Industry plays an important role in making the case for corporate social responsibility.

9. Nor would it be easy to identify as "human rights related" a selection of the EU's projects, or projects run by international organisations (e.g. the UN, OSCE and Council of Europe) to which the Government contributes both through the costs of membership and through further voluntary contributions. Yet many such projects do have a human rights angle, and the Government is committed to encouraging the institutions in question to increase their commitment to promoting human rights. For example, the Government recently funded and organised for members of the UN Security Council a seminar on Human Rights specifically in order to promote mainstreaming of human rights in UN work.

We recommend that the Government assure us in its response to this Report that the suspension of a PCA is a genuine policy option which it would consider instigating in response to human rights violations of a significantly grave nature by a signatory country. (Recommendation (c) (paragraph 11))

10. The UK continues to regard the suspension of a Partnership and Co-operation Agreement, or of similar such agreements between the EU and third countries, as a genuine policy option. The fact that the Government has not called on the EU to exercise this option reflects the Government's belief that human rights in CIS countries are better protected by an EU, and UK national, policy of critical engagement in all but the most extreme circumstances. Maintaining EU/third party agreements, and so a full political dialogue, preserves the EU's leverage on the countries concerned and allows the EU to support the long-term process of democratisation by engaging with the whole of civil society. However, the UK would argue for part or full suspension of an EU agreement if we considered the situation in the individual country warranted such a decision, and if other means of exerting influence set out in the agreement, e.g. political dialogue, had been exhausted.

We recommend once again that the Government state in its response to this Report when the green paper on mercenaries will be published. (Recommendation (d) paragraph 13)

11. The Government notes the Committee's recommendation and continues to work on this complex issue.



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