

Open Doors' 3 policy asks of the UK government

Open Doors UK & Ireland is part of Open Doors International, a global NGO network which has supported and strengthened persecuted Christians in over 60 countries for over 60 years. The organisation's UK Advocacy Department is well-known within the UK Parliament and is in regular contact with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development and the Prime Minister's office.

In light of Open Doors' on-the-ground experience and policy expertise, there are three pillars which the organisation believes the UK government needs in place if it is to become a centre of global excellence in supporting Christians and other religious minorities the world over. The UK government needs to pursue progress, keep focused and involved local communities:

1. **Pursue progress:** identify priority countries
2. **Keep focused:** make the PM's Special Envoy on FoRB a permanent role
3. **Involve local communities:** Local faith leaders are key players in development

1. Pursue progress

Nigeria is a key country where the Foreign and Commonwealth Office should focus. Of the countries in the top 15 of Open Doors' [World Watch List](#), which outlines the 50 most dangerous countries in the world to live as a Christian, this is a country with egregious levels of violence against Christians with Open Doors reporting over 3,000 Christians killed on the basis of their faith in the country in 2018 alone. However, it is also a country which has a good and constructive relationship with the UK and hence there is opportunity for engagement on this issue. If the FCO was to properly come alongside the government and civil service of Nigeria and to prioritise engagement on FoRB in this way, investing the necessary levels of resources, a real difference could be made over time. If this strategy simply highlights misdemeanours it will not work, but if it offers constructive support it could lead to real fruitful change over time.

The FoRB team at the FCO should work alongside the Nigeria desk as consultants, bringing in NGOs and other experts to identify the areas where capacity for FoRB can be inbuilt and in doing so religious literacy at country level will also increase. The All Party Parliamentary Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief and its vast list of stakeholder organisations could also bring real expertise as well as challenge to this process.

2. Keep focused

In July 2018 the Prime Minister appointed a special envoy for freedom of religion or belief in Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon with the remit to 'promote the UK's firm stance on religious tolerance abroad, helping to tackle religious discrimination in countries where minority faith groups face persecution'.¹ Having an individual looking at this issue as a priority has been extremely useful to organisations such as Open Doors and hence its continuation is key. However, there is also space for the role to evolve. Future special envoys should:

- Have increased capacity so that good quality research and relations with expert NGOs can be better developed
- The special envoy should be involved in discussions with the Department for International Trade around trade agreements post-brexite to ensure that freedom of religion or belief is at the heart of any deal. There is precedent for a trade agreement being used as a carrot by

¹ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/lord-ahmad-appointed-as-pms-special-envoy-to-promote-religious-freedom>

the European Union for the safe release of Asia Bibi in Pakistan² and hence the envoy should be charged with considering where else this method could be used post-brexit.

- Now that the persecution of Christians has been recognised as a crucial issue by the Truro review, an individual with the specific role of working on the persecution of Christians should be appointed within the envoy's team
- The envoy should produce an annual report highlighting the difference the role has made and where the envoy believes greater work can be done on freedom of religion or belief in the following year by both their office and the UK government more widely. In doing this, the envoy should clearly outline the office's priority areas and themes for the year ahead.
- UK diplomatic posts around the world should be required to send an annual review of the situation for Christians and other religious minorities in their countries to the envoy. This would provide insightful information for the envoy with which the envoy can work with post to consider how the situation may be improved. This would also be a good exercise for embassy staff in terms of religious literacy training.

3. Involved local communities

The FCO and DfID's wider targets will be greatly impacted if religion is recognised as a highly significant factor which delineates the lives of the majority of those the departments are serving. The Western and secular framing of development is not sufficient for a highly religious world:

- **Local faith actors take a 'whole-person approach' and provide spiritual capital as well as social and financial capital to a community.** In a world where over 80% of people believe in a god,³ this unique and intangible resource offers distinctive support to victims because it understands these people's needs and how faith is intrinsically linked with people's identity and sense of purpose.⁴ This is particularly key for those needing trauma care.
- **Local faith actors remain in places which are too dangerous for aid agencies or other institutions to remain.** Churches are situated in the community and are influential in the lives of those who are associated with the church or its wider ministries. In light of this, local faith actors should be understood as a resource which, with support from DfID, should be utilised in development work.
- **Religion should be identified as a factor of vulnerability in any assessment made in DfID programming.** As was noted in a 2019 statement by the US Administration, FCO and Wilton Park⁵ which brought together FoRB experts and practitioners with FCO civil servants and political actors: 'The intersection between the chaos of crisis and religious minority status dramatically increases vulnerabilities, yet assistance providers to date have been slow to recognise the significance of religion as a factor'.

If you have any questions, or would like further information please contact Open Doors' advocacy team: advocacy@opendoorsuk.org

² See <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/02/asia-bibi-central-to-trade-deals-eu-tells-pakistan/>

³ See Pew: <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/belief-in-god/>

⁴ See https://www.tearfund.org/~media/files/tilz/churches/integral_mission/2017-tearfund-integral-inspirational-and-influential-en.pdf

⁵ See <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/WP1641-Outcome-statement.pdf>