



DEBATE: RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

11 July 2019

Baroness Cox's speech:

My Lords, I congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Elton, on initiating this timely debate and on his comprehensive opening speech. As other noble Lords have highlighted the disturbing scale of persecution in our world today, I will focus on those suffering from persecution whom I have met, and seek to be a voice for them. Time allows me to highlight only three often neglected situations: the persecution of Muslims in parts of Sudan, Christians in northern and central Nigeria, and those in Thailand who have had to flee for their lives from the application of sharia law in Pakistan. It is with a heavy heart that I report the findings from my visits, especially because those who endure such suffering are largely unreached by the world's major aid organisations and off the radar screen of international media.

I visited Sudan over 30 times during the war waged between 1989 and 2005 by President al-Bashir and witnessed the scale of brutality inflicted on the Sudanese people, while the United Kingdom Government allowed the regime to continue its genocidal policies with impunity. Despite al-Bashir's removal, severe human rights violations continue across the country. The recent massacres in Khartoum received some publicity, but attacks on people elsewhere are largely unreported.

For example, in Blue Nile state the Government of Sudan's army targets indigenous, courageous Muslims who oppose the Islamist regime in Khartoum. On a recent visit to Wadaka, in Blue Nile, we met 9,000 Muslims who had had to flee the fighting. They were scavenging grass and roots with no nutritional value. One lady told me: "We lost everything. On the journey, some people were injured", while the regime, she said, "took all our cattle. We fled without anything. When we came here, there was nobody to help us". It is a policy of my small NGO, the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, or HART, to reach such people who are trapped in these situations. As we were the only NGO in that region, we made an emergency appeal and obtained £50,000 for food aid. That may not sound much but £27 will feed a family of seven for three months until the rainy season comes, so we were able to save many lives and bring hope to people suffering severe persecution. I hope that the Minister will be able to offer some reassurance as to how the United Kingdom will contribute to the international community's duty to provide for and protect civilians dying from persecution by their own Governments, such as the Muslims in Blue Nile.

In Nigeria, the 12 northern states and Plateau state have suffered for many years from religious persecution. Thousands of Christians and many Muslims who defy the ideologically motivated Boko Haram and Islamist Fulanis have been killed. Hundreds of churches and some

mosques have been burnt. The motives behind the growing wave of attacks by Islamist Fulani militants have been widely debated, but the Bishop of Truro's very good report devotes nine pages to analysing the Fulani insurgency and claims that, "targeted violence against Christian communities in the context of worship suggests that religion plays a key part".

Before most of the attacks in Plateau, Benue, Taraba, southern Kaduna and Bauchi states, the Fulani sent a warning signal via a note or phone call—in accordance with the rules of jihad—to tell the villagers that an attack is imminent. During many of these attacks, the Fulani are reported to have shouted "Allahu Akbar", "Destroy the infidels", and "Wipe out the infidels". I have visited many of the worst affected areas and seen the tragedies of death and destruction. I have stood in the ruins of the house of a Christian pastor, where he was martyred.

One survivor told me: "The Fulani militants took my brother, his wife and all their six children. They tied and slaughtered them like animals. My sister was raped, and her wrists cut off before she was shot through the heart". A lady from a neighbouring village shared a similar story. She said: "The Fulani were hacking and killing people, making sure that those that were shot were finished off. They wore red to conceal blood ... on their clothes as they butchered their victims". In every village, the message from local people is the same: "Please, please help us! The Fulani are coming. We are not safe in our own homes". Yet time and again, our Government have ignored their cry for help.

As the noble Baroness, Lady Stroud, highlighted, our Government have shown a reluctance to acknowledge the scale of suffering endured by Christians there. Ministers refer to the Fulani attacks as a consequence of population growth, land and water disputes or tit-for-tat clashes between farmers and herders. This does not reflect the reality on the ground, which has been identified by leading people within Nigeria as genocide. Can I urge the Minister to revisit Her Majesty's Government's characterisation of this violence? There are many complex issues but blatant religious persecution cannot be explained by desertification or poverty. Fulani militants are engaged in a strategic land-grabbing policy, motivated by an extremist Islamist ideology and equipped with sophisticated weaponry, which has led to thousands of Christians being massacred and to the permanent displacement of hundreds of Christian communities in recent years. These are examples of situations where Her Majesty's Government seem to be wilfully faith-blind. If they remain blind to ideological aspects of persecution, they will be ineffective—a point emphasised on pages 123 and 124 of the Bishop of Truro's report.

Finally, in Pakistan, Christian and Hindu girls are frequently abducted, forced into marriage and to change their religion. Ahmadi Muslims are also targeted because of their beliefs. They suffer violence, murder and attacks on their mosques, businesses and properties. Some have been forced to seek asylum in Thailand. I met some of the families who had escaped to Bangkok. I wept with those who have endured horrendous suffering. One man was kidnapped by a mob in Pakistan for being an apostate. The mob shackled him with metal chains and attempted to amputate his leg. He eventually escaped with his wife to Thailand, but his relatives in Pakistan are still in danger. He told me, weeping: "Even last week my brother and my 16 month-old nephew were taken captive. They grabbed the baby, repeatedly smashed him into a wall and demanded to know my whereabouts".

It is the privilege of my small NGO, HART, to be with our partners suffering from ignored persecutions. We always return humbled and inspired by their courage, resilience, faith and dignity. Across the world, many people are targeted because of their faith. We must no longer deny the reality of the cause of their suffering. I conclude with one of the conclusions from the Bishop of Truro's report:

“The danger confronting policy makers is to begin to think that to prioritise FoRB — freedom of religion or belief— presents too great a risk and consequently to prioritise other areas. To do so, however, would be to renege on commitments to minority communities and to allow the continuation with impunity of the most shocking abuses of human rights in the modern era ... To give Freedom of Religion or Belief the Priority it deserves within a broader human rights framework would simply be to enable the FCO to do its job better.”