**House of Lords, 10 December 2018**

Sudan and South Sudan

**Question asked by Lord Curry of Kirkharle**

To ask Her Majesty’s Government what action they are taking to support the release of political prisoners held without charge in Sudan and South Sudan; and, pending any release, what representations they are making to the relevant authorities for such prisoners to be allowed visits by their families and support agencies.

**Lord Curry of Kirkharle**

My Lords, I beg leave to ask the Question standing in my name on the Order Paper and declare an interest as recorded in the register.

**The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon)**

My Lords, through our engagement with senior members of the Governments of Sudan and South Sudan, the UK continues to make clear that any detentions for political reasons are unacceptable, and that any detainees must be treated in accordance with international standards and have access to legal representation and to their families. The Governments of Sudan and South Sudan must respect their people’s rights to freedom of expression, opinion and association.

**Lord Curry of Kirkharle**

My Lords, I absolutely agree with the Minister’s Answer. The problem is that the leaders of both Sudan and South Sudan have this year declared that they will release political prisoners, but they still retain a significant number. In the case of South Sudan, this was a condition of the peace deal signed by its President. These detainees are still being held without charge, many in dreadful conditions. One is a personal friend. They are being denied access. We have committed this year to address humanitarian aid. We have committed to fund £50 million for Sudan and £130 million for South Sudan. Surely it should be a condition of this aid that they abide by the signature they have made to release these political prisoners, who are still being held without charge. They need to release them immediately. It is a blatant disregard for human rights, as we have just been discussing.

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon**

My Lords, I agree with the noble Lord. I am aware of the facts of the case he mentioned. I assure him that detentions for political purposes are always unacceptable. As he rightly said, over the past year there has been an increasing number of detentions, particularly in South Sudan and Sudan. The UK Government have made clear our concerns both in public and in private. The noble Lord makes important points on the humanitarian support we are providing to South Sudan and Sudan. I assure him that we prioritise the importance of freedom of expression across all elements of society in our bilateral discussions, as I did myself when I visited Sudan recently.

**Lord Chidgey**

My Lords, the agreement signed between the parties to the conflict in December 2017 stated that they shall release to the International Committee of the Red Cross without delay any prisoners of war and all political detainees. Despite the reiteration of this agreement in June 2018, the Government of South Sudan has failed to comply, as we know. Does the UK agree with Amnesty International that the Government of South Sudan must co-operate with the African Union to establish the hybrid court agreed between them to ensure that those responsible for these abuses can be brought to justice as soon as possible?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon**

I agree with the noble Lord. He will be pleased to know that this morning I was with Kate Allen of Amnesty International as part of today’s celebrations on the declaration of human rights. The points he made are pertinent. We continue to hold them accountable on that very basis.

**Baroness Cox**

My Lords, a representative of the Foreign Office said at an open meeting that the UK Government’s policy regarding Sudan had changed from sticks to carrots. The regime in Khartoum is enjoying munching those carrots, but on this Human Rights Day I ask the Minister: what conditions are the UK Government applying to the Government of Sudan to justify those carrots, particularly regarding the arrest and detention of human rights activists, often with torture, including Mohamed Boshi, who was forcibly removed while in exile in Cairo and is detained in Khartoum’s notorious Kober prison simply for being a member of an opposition political party—despite the fact that, in April, President Bashir issued a decree to release all political detainees?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon**

Let me assure the noble Baroness that I visited Sudan recently and did not go equipped with any carrots. It was quite a candid conversation concerning priorities of human rights, including press freedoms. Civil society organisations were present. I conducted a round table, meeting with one of the senior vice-presidents, and we had some productive outcomes. For example, we will now be pen-holders at the Human Rights Council, and will use that as a means to push further reforms that are required on the ground. The detention of political prisoners, as the noble Baroness and others have made clear, is unacceptable.

**Lord Collins of Highbury**

My Lords, I appreciate the Minister’s comments and I know that the UK Government have been putting pressure on the authorities, but the case of Peter Biar Ajak is concerning. He has had 135 days in detention with very limited access to legal aid, or even to his family. The case needs to be heard publicly, and I would appreciate the Minister making clear to the authorities that we want a clear understanding that he will be given proper access to legal aid and representation.

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon**

I note very carefully what has been said by the noble Lord and others in this respect, and I can assure noble Lords that, when it comes to political detainees, the very points he has outlined are paramount in our direct engagement with the Governments—be it with South Sudan, as in this instance, or with Sudan—and that we will continue to ensure that the right legal access and support is provided to all political prisoners.

**Lord Alton of Liverpool**

My Lords, on this 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, can the Minister tell us which of the 30 articles in the universal declaration the Republic of the Sudan is not in breach of? Given that some 2 million people were displaced and some 200,000 to 300,000 killed in Darfur, and that Field Marshal Omar al-Bashir—referred to by my noble friend Lady Cox a moment ago—is indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity, how can we justify continuing and trying to step up trade with the Government of Sudan, and what are we doing to bring him to justice?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon**

On that final point, as the noble Lord and all your Lordships are aware, he is indicted. The Government do not engage with him directly. However, we are looking—as I said myself during my visit—to build support for civil society. I can tell the noble Lord that there is one shimmer of hope, one silver lining to that dark cloud which still hangs over Sudan. I found that on one issue very close to his heart and to mine—the issue of freedom of religion or belief—what I saw on the ground of the relationships between the leaders I met from the Christian and Muslim communities was very positive. Indeed, in some of the challenges the Christian communities have in running their schools, particularly with the governor of Khartoum, the imams from the Muslim community were acting as their advocates.

**Viscount Waverley**

My Lords, will the Minister outline what he explained to the officials whom he met in Khartoum? What was the response that he got from them?

**Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon**

It was not just officials that we met in Khartoum; we met government representatives as well. As I have said, the vice-president and Foreign Minister were among them. One of the objectives I had was to ensure that we brought focus to the human rights record of Sudan, and I was therefore pleased that, as an outcome of my visit, they agreed for us to become pen-holders at the Human Rights Council.