

APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief

EGM

Wednesday 11th November 2020

Call to order:

EGM of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief was called at 13:00 on 11/11/2020 and held online via Zoom.

1. Attendees:

1. Jim Shannon MP
2. Lord Alton of Liverpool
3. Fiona Bruce MP
4. Tommy Sheppard MP
5. Preet Gill MP
6. Jeffrey Donaldson MP
7. Alexander Stafford MP
8. Amro Hussain – APPG staff
9. Ashley Goodall (On behalf of Baroness Nicholson)

Apologies:

- Lord Suri

2. Election of Officers

The motion to elect Tommy Sheppard MP and Alexander Stafford MP as Vice-Chairs of the APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief was proposed by Preet Gill MP and seconded by Jeffrey Donaldson MP with no objections from other APPG members.

Lord Alton of Liverpool suggested that in future elections of Officers should take place at the AGM so that other APPG meetings could focus on FoRB issues. Jim Shannon accepted this point and noted that in this case the circumstances were special.

3. Brief Update

Jim Shannon MP then provided the following update on the APPG's recent activities:

- **Recent FoRB Advocacy**
 - As mentioned in last week's e-mail update, over the last month, APPG members participated in a range of parliamentary debates on FoRB issues. For example, debates on the Bishop of Truro Review recommendations, Rohingya Muslims, Uighurs, Sudan and Tibet.
 - Members in the House of Lords have also brought forward and debated important FoRB related amendments to bills. For example, the Lord Alton led amendments to the Trade Bill would nullify UK trade arrangements if the High Court of England and Wales makes a preliminary determination that a trade partner has perpetrated genocide. APPG members are encouraged to observe the progress of these amendments and offer their support.
 - APPG members have also tabled a wide range of parliamentary questions on FoRB issues and sent several advocacy letters including a letter to the Foreign Secretary to encourage him to reassess the Government's position on the existence of forced organ harvesting in China and a letter to the Leader of the Opposition to urge him to make FoRB a human rights priority for the Labour Party.

- **Upcoming Debate on FoRB and Covid-19**
 - At the end of November, I believe the Backbench Business Committee will schedule a Westminster Hall Debate on the impact that covid-19 has had on religious and belief minorities globally. The APPG recently made a submission on this topic to the International Development Select Committee Inquiry which examined the secondary impacts of covid-19. The submission highlighted how the problems facing these marginalised communities have been exacerbated by the virus. Amro will share this submission with you as well as some other briefings and I encourage you all to attend the debate if possible.

 - The debate will hopefully take place in the same week as Red Wednesday which is on November 25th and which is a day to commemorate the persecution of Christians around the world. Aid to the Church in Need will be launching a report online to mark this day and Amro will share with you the details of this event.

- **Ministerial Meetings**
 - The APPG had a productive meeting with Lord Ahmad on Oct 19. The meeting discussed a range of FoRB issues in Pakistan and India such as the persecution of the Sikh and Ahmadiyya communities and the misuse of blasphemy laws. We also discussed what can be done to tackle the growing reports of kidnapping and forced conversion and marriage of young girls from religious and belief minority communities in Pakistan such as the case of Arzoo Raja, a 13 year old girl abducted by a neighbour 21 years her senior. A follow up letter has been sent to the Minister which Amro can share with you if you are interested.

- As you know, the APPG published the report of the finding of its inquiry into conflict in Nigeria in June. The Minister for Africa responded to the report and we are in the process of trying to arrange a meeting with Minister Duddridge to further discuss the report and the violence in Nigeria. Hopefully we can find a date soon and Amro will share with you the details once we have them (at this point Fiona Bruce mentioned that she had received a letter from the Minister which she went to retrieve).

- **APPG Commentary on State of FoRB Report**
 - Every year the APPG produces a report which provides brief accounts of the FoRB situation in the countries which the FCO has listed as priority human rights countries. The report is produced by the APPG working alongside a range of human rights and faith-based organisations. Its purpose is to make sure that HMG has the most up-to-date and accurate information on which to base FoRB policy. The APPG is working on putting together this year's report and previous versions can be found online.

- **New Members:**
 - In addition to Tommy and Alexander, the APPG has welcomed a few new members in recent months including John Cryer MP, Theresa Villers MP and Baronesses Eaton and Whitaker. The APPG would be very grateful if everyone here could suggest to your party colleagues to join our group or provide Amro with names of Parliamentarians who may be interested in joining so he can reach out to them.

- **Parliamentary Officer Applications**
 - As you know the APPG is in the process of hiring a Parliamentary Officer to support the APPG Director and our members to carry out FoRB advocacy. The deadline for applications is today and we have had approximately over 100 applications. Amro will provide the names of all the applicants to Officers and will set about creating a shortlist who, with Officer approval, will be invited to complete a written exercise and come to interview with myself and other Officers who are available. We hope that the new person will be in post by early next year.

- **UK FoRB Forum Meeting in December**
 - Finally, the third meeting of the UK FoRB Forum will take place online on Tuesday Dec 1st at 10.30am. For those who are unaware, the forum is a civil society space, chaired by the Bishop of Truro, where organisations working on FoRB can raise FoRB issues to be worked on collaboratively. The APPG has time allocated in every meeting to give an update about its activities so if anyone would like to speak, or attend, please let Amro know.



4. Any Other Business

- Preet Gill MP mentioned that she raised the issue of FoRB with her party leader Keir Starmer on the back of the letter sent by Jim Shannon on this issue.
- Lord Alton mentioned the case of Arzoo Raja in Pakistan and suggested that the APPG have a specific meeting on the issue of forced marriage and conversion with Ministers.
- He also mentioned the case of Leah Sharibu and the Daesh affiliated attacks in Mozambique which involved the beheading of over 50 people.
- He mentioned the amendments to the Trade Bill in the Lords which were well supported and should be back in the Commons soon.
- Fiona Bruce MP thanked Jim Shannon MP and Amro Hussain for their work on the APPG.
- She also raised the issue of Leah Sharibu in Business Questions.
- She presented a letter she received from the FCO Minister for Africa encouraging the APPG to meet with the High Commission for Nigeria and offering to facilitate such a meeting.
- She then raised concerns about the FCDO John Bunyan Fund. £240k had been allocated to the fund but the FCDO would not reveal how they spent it due to concerns about security. Fiona raised concerns about transparency and taxpayer value for money. Lord Alton suggested making a freedom of information request should HMG refuse to reveal how they had spent the funds.
- Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP mentioned that he would like the APPG to explore issues of FoRB in the workplace in the UK in 2021.

5. Close of meeting