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Abstract

The true measure of whether human rights indeed are the “irreducible core” of the UK’s new foreign policy will be the extent to which the coalition government respects and protects “core” human rights.

Keywords

Human rights, United Kingdom foreign policy, Human rights conventions, National security, Refugees, International criminal justice

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Human Rights at the "Core" of UK Foreign Policy requires Respect for Core Human Rights

by Erin Mooney

The true measure of whether human rights indeed are the "[irreducible core](#)" of the UK's new foreign policy will be the extent to which the coalition government respects and protects "core" human rights.

Five areas are sure to be critical benchmarks:

First, the government's commitment to human rights will be evidenced by its own acceptance of these standards. Of the nine internationally-recognized "[core human rights instruments](#)," the UK still is not a party to the conventions concerning the [Protection of Persons from Enforced Disappearances](#) and the [Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers](#); nor has it ratified the [Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#). Ratifying all of the core human rights instruments is an obvious first step. It follows that the government also must ensure respect for these standards. The [assessment](#) of the UK's human rights record by the [Universal Periodic Review](#) mechanism of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council pinpointed a number of ways in which the UK must do better. Following up on the various recommendations should be a priority for the government; the UK's human rights record will be reviewed by the UN again in 2012.

Second, core human rights cannot be a casualty of efforts to combat terrorism. The coalition government sent a strong signal to this effect in June by authorizing an inquiry into allegations that British intelligence officers were complicit in the mistreatment of suspects held by the United States, Pakistan, and other countries. However, the decision to appoint as the judge leading the investigation the very official who has overseen the UK's intelligence services for the past four years has raised serious [concerns](#) about the objectivity of this inquiry.

Third, the UK has obligations under international law to grant asylum to recognized refugees and, for those denied asylum, to refrain from sending them back to countries where their lives would be at risk. Contrary to the [advice](#) of the UN Refugee Agency (or [UNHCR](#)), the coalition government has continued its predecessor's policy of deporting rejected Iraqi asylum-seekers back to Iraq where conditions remain, as the Foreign and Commonwealth acknowledges, "[highly dangerous](#)." Moreover, the High Court [ruled](#) last month that the policy of "fast-track" deportation of foreign nationals refused permission to remain in Britain (giving deportees but a few hours notice, often late at night, without adequate time to contact legal counsel) was unlawful; the Home Office plans to appeal the verdict.

Fourth, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the UK has a special role and responsibility to strengthen UN efforts to safeguard civilians during armed conflict. In recent years, the Security Council has adopted several important resolutions on the protection of civilians, including specific commitments for protecting children and combating sexual violence in armed conflict. Yet, as outgoing UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs (and former British diplomat) Sir John Holmes [bemoaned](#) to the UN Security Council last month, for millions of civilians caught in the midst of armed conflict, "too little has changed on the ground."

Much more needs to be done to bridge the gap between the norms espoused at the UN in New York and the harsh realities in the field. The UK, as the current chair of the UN's expert group on the issue, has a critical role to play in pushing this agenda forward. Encouragingly, the government has [pledged](#) to keep the protection of civilians "at the forefront of our political, security, human rights and humanitarian work."

Fifth, ensuring that there is no impunity for perpetrators of human rights violations is essential. Historically, the UK has been a leader in such efforts, most notably with the arrest in 1998 of Chile's former military ruler, Augusto Pinochet, for mass human rights abuses against his own people; and through its support for the Rome Statute establishing the [International Criminal Court](#) (ICC). Particularly disappointing, therefore, is the recent announcement by the coalition government's new Minister for Africa, Henry Bellingham, that the UK will be "[candid friends](#)" with the Government of Sudan. President Omar al Bashir has been [indicted](#) by the ICC, accused of masterminding war crimes in Sudan's Darfur region, where the conflict that has raged since 2003 has caused the deaths of at least 200,000 civilians and the displacement of some 2.9 million. In mid-July, the ICC updated the charges against Bashir to include [genocide](#). "We voiced our concern about certain issues," Bellingham stated, presumably in an oblique reference to the ICC issue, "but we also said we want the relationship to be a strong one and one where UK bilateral trade will increase," in particular through investment in Sudan's oil sector. [Oil revenues](#) are widely regarded as having bankrolled the Government of Sudan's military operations in Darfur. Incidentally, the UK's decision also flies in the face of oil revenue and anti-terrorism [sanctions](#) against Sudan imposed by the US, with whom the UK boasts "our most important relationship" and an "unbreakable alliance."

Championing a foreign policy based on human rights is one thing; matching lofty words with deeds is quite another. Principled action by the coalition government in these five key areas would be a start.

Erin Mooney is a consultant to the United Nations and the Brookings Institution on issues of human rights and forced migration and Adjunct Professor in International Relations at the University of Toronto (2008-10). The views expressed are those of the author, writing in an independent capacity.