



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon
Minister of State for South Asia and
the Commonwealth
Prime Minister's Special
Representative on Preventing Sexual
Violence in Conflict

King Charles Street
London
SW1A 2AH
Tel: 0207 008 5000

Email:
fcdo.correspondence@fcdo.gov.uk

www.gov.uk/fcdo

Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Our ref: MC2020/22035

9 November 2020

Dear Sir George,

Thank you for your email of 27 October, writing on behalf of your constituents about the persecution of Christians during the Covid-19 outbreak. I am replying as the Minister of State responsible for Human Rights.

I have been appalled by the reports of discrimination and persecution of religious minorities. Vulnerable religious minorities already experience discrimination, marginalisation and violence. COVID-19 and the efforts to contain the virus have exacerbated these problems.

The UK Government works to ensure that UK overseas aid is targeted at the most vulnerable and that religious minorities are not discriminated against. The UK is committed to delivering its aid according to internationally recognised humanitarian principles. These principles ensure that humanitarian assistance is delivered to those who are most vulnerable and most in need of this assistance irrespective of race, religion or ethnicity. We are firmly committed to the protection of religious minorities, and regularly challenge our partners to demonstrate that they are doing all they can to meet the needs of the most vulnerable people, including those from religious minorities.

FCDO's use of country context analysis has increased the extent to which religious dynamics and religious groups are factored into all of our country programmes. The FCDO undertakes interdisciplinary analysis of a country's politics, society, state and economy to identify the most significant problems that hinder development and the main entry points and opportunities to create change. There is a strong emphasis on how politics, security, and demographics interact with economic growth and human development. This includes the role of religion and the persecution of religious minorities.

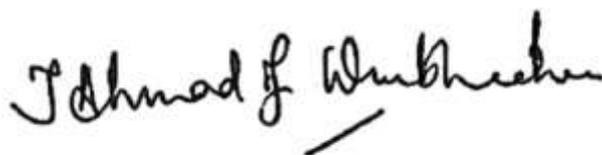
We recognise that vulnerable religious minority groups will experience crises such as COVID-19 outbreaks differently. Crises are likely to reinforce their marginalised position in society, their experience of discrimination, violence and stigma, and further limit their access to essential support and services. For this reason, guidance was circulated across FCDO highlighting that inclusion must be central to our response, and that the specific contexts and needs of vulnerable religious communities and other vulnerable groups should be taken into account when developing practical programmes of assistance.

On 8 June, I hosted a roundtable to hear from faith leaders and faith-based development organisations about whether minority faith communities were facing specific challenges during this COVID-19 pandemic. I have asked my officials to follow up with participants on some of the key points from our discussion. Once I have this additional information, I will be better placed to discuss next steps and how we can work together more effectively to ensure those most vulnerable do not face additional discrimination because of their faith.

We also remain committed to defending freedom of religion or belief, and promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities. Work is continuing to implement the recommendations from the Bishop of Truro's independent review of Foreign Office support for persecuted Christians in a way that will bring real improvements to the lives of individuals who are persecuted because of their faith, belief, or because they have no religious belief.

I am proud that the UK is a global leader in supporting international efforts to combat the outbreak of COVID-19. Protecting others plays a key role in ensuring we protect our own citizens. We will continue to work with our partners to support global efforts to combat the outbreak of COVID-19 and ensure support is directed to help those most vulnerable.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

LORD (TARIQ) AHMAD OF WIMBLEDON
Minister of State for South Asia and the Commonwealth
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