



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

UN Political and Sustaining Peace
King Charles Street

London

SW1A 2AH

Paul Webster

webster.home@btinternet.com

Email:

fcdo.correspondence@fcdo.gov.uk

www.gov.uk/fcdo

Dear Paul Webster,

Thank you for your email of 8 March to the Foreign Secretary about the United Nations (UN). We have been asked to reply as the team leading on relations with the UN. I apologise for the delay.

Your letter has been shared with all relevant thematic and geographic teams, given the wide ranging nature of your interests we have focused our response on those areas most relevant to the UN as an organisation.

In relation to the concerns you raise on the UN Human Rights Council, the UK Government, as a founding member, has always been a strong advocate for the UN's human rights fora and will continue to fully support the Council and the tools and mechanisms at its disposal. The UK has a close working relationship with UN bodies and is committed to upholding the rule of law and the rules-based international system. The UK has a standing invitation to all UN Special Procedure mandate holders, and it is UK Government policy to accept and facilitate visits by mandate holders and respond to their communications, even when we have not supported the establishment of a particular mandate. We strongly encourage other UN Member States to do the same.

Your paper refers to concerns about the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and specifically on applying a human rights approach, and including the Arms Trade Treaty and Northern Ireland post-conflict situation within the scope of WPS. WPS is an important component of the UK's work to promote human rights and support sustainable peace processes. As part of this, we champion women's full, equal and meaningful participation in all aspects of peace and security work, including in economic and social rights.

The UK Government takes its obligations under the Arms Trade Treaty seriously. In line with these obligations, we assess under the Consolidated Criteria whether, among other things, exports would contribute to, or undermine, peace, security or stability. The UK is committed to implementing the National Action Plan on WPS. It is outwardly focused on our international development, defence and diplomatic efforts. This is intentional, not to duplicate domestic strategies that already exist. However, women in Northern Ireland are a crucial part of UK domestic activity on

peacebuilding, community cohesion, and preventing and countering violent extremism. The FCDO has supported women peacebuilders in Northern Ireland through the Women Mediators across the Commonwealth Initiative to share lessons from women's experience of the Northern Ireland peace process. We are also interested in exploring where we can share good practice and lessons learned across the domestic/international space.

In relation to ratifying the Istanbul Convention, the UK signed it in 2012 signalling our strong commitment to tackling violence against women and girls, and this Government remains committed to ratifying it. Legislation needs to pass before we can ratify the Convention, so at this stage we cannot be sure what the timeframe for ratification will be.

On appointing a FCDO Special Envoy for WPS, the current Special Envoy for Gender Equality, Alicia Herbert (Director for Education Gender and Equality) works to deliver a more robust and coherent approach to promoting gender equality. Lord Ahmad remains the PM's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict (PSVI). On International Women's Day in 2019, HRH The Countess of Wessex publicly committed her support to further the UK's effort on the WPS agenda and the PSVI. The UK is uniquely advantaged in having such an array of senior champions on WPS.

In relation to concerns on strengthening training and leadership for UN peacekeeping and peace-building missions, and ensuring a better gender balance, the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy reaffirms the UK's commitment to peacekeeping, and more broadly on conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding. We are proud of the UK's contributions in this space. Our deployment of a Long Range Reconnaissance Group to the mission in Mali (MINUSMA) continues to make a real difference to local communities, while developing the UN's understanding of threats to civilian populations and helping prevent future threats from armed groups.

The UK Government is committed to deploying more women on its operations and is working toward meeting benchmark targets set by the UN – 8% for contingents and 18% for staff officers in 2021 - increasing annually by 1% until they reach 15% and 25% respectively in 2028. As of March 2021, women made up 9% of UK peacekeeping contingents, and 7% of our staff officers. We will shortly carry out our own assessment of barriers to increasing the number of women in our armed forces.

We continue to train up to 10,000 peacekeepers each year through the British Peace Support Team (Africa), and aim to expand our offer to include training on sexual and gender-based violence, in addition to existing standard modules such as on prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. There is an opportunity to further progress UN peacekeeping reform and capacity building at the UN Peacekeeping Ministerial in Seoul later this year including through a pledge of continued funding to the Elsie Initiative for women in peace operations.

In relation to the concerns you raise on mediation and peacebuilding and specifically training and the role of women in negotiations, the UK Government is committed to supporting the successful resolution of violent conflict. Mediation - the use of negotiations and dialogue facilitated by third parties to support conflict resolution to reach a political settlement - is a core part of this support. We work closely with our bilateral and multilateral partners, including the UN, and with and through leading mediation organisations, to ensure that our support to mediation and peace processes is coordinated and driven by a strong evidence base.

We are committed to promoting gender mainstreaming within all aspects of mediation and peace process support, including through gender sensitive analysis and design, and gender training for mediators and mediation. We are supportive of initiatives to increase training on gender for UN mediation teams, such as those outlined in the UN Mediation Support Unit's "Guidance on Effective Mediation", and "Guidance on Gender and Inclusive Mediation Strategies".

The UK supports the full, equal and meaningful leadership, participation and representation of women in all aspects of peace processes and wider security, including ensuring a greater number of women as mediators and as negotiators within the different tracks of a peace process.

Thank you for your engagement on these important issues,

Yours sincerely,

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