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GLOBAL | CSW Welcomes Debate on the Persecution of Christians

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) warmly welcomes the three-hour debate on Dec. 3 in the House of Commons on the persecution of Christians in the 21st century, and the calls made by several Members of Parliament for the issue to be given much greater attention.

The debate focused on the persecution of Christians around the world, including countries such as Pakistan, India, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Nigeria, China, North Korea, Burma, Eritrea and Iran.

Several MPs highlighted the severity of the persecution of Christians around the world in passionate and detailed speeches. Sir Tony Baldry MP (Conservative, Banbury) described the scale and severity of the situation, saying, “There is now practically no country—from Morocco to Pakistan—in which Christians can freely practice their religion. That must be a matter of real concern to this House. There is a severe danger, as we start to celebrate the feast of Christmas in this country, that Christianity will be almost completely erased from the traditional Middle East Holy Land of the Bible. Joseph would not now be advised to take Mary to Egypt to avoid the dangers of Herod, because Jesus would just not have been safe there today.”

Sir Tony led MPs in urging the British government to increase its efforts to address these concerns, saying, “I would really like both Front Benches to understand that what the House is trying to say today is that it is not prepared to continue to stand by while there is global persecution of Christians. They should not think that the line they want to take is sufficient.”

Stephen Pound MP (Labour, Ealing North) said it was “beyond doubt” that “Christians are the most persecuted single group in the world today on grounds of religion.” Calling for increased attention to the issue, he said, “There is one thing we must do. We must assist wherever we can financially and materially and we must raise the profile, but we must never, ever forget to pray for our fellow co-religionists. The power of prayer is immense and it has an incredible force. Let us never forget suffering Christians in our prayers. Let us continue to do that. Advent might be a couple of days old, but this is a powerful season for prayer.”

Rehman Chishti MP (Conservative, Gillingham and Rainham) focused on the blasphemy laws in Pakistan, where he was born. He said, “I come from a Muslim background, and my father was an Imam. When I saw that the topic was “Persecution of Christians in the 21st century”, I knew that it was absolutely right and proper to have a debate on that subject. It is important for the world to realize that persecution goes on. I was speaking to a good friend of mine, the former Bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir-Ali, about this, and he told me that the persecution of Christians was taking place in more than 130 of the 190 countries in the world at the moment.

That is completely and utterly unacceptable; it is a very sad state of affairs.”

Responding to the debate, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Mark Simmonds MP, assured the House of Commons that freedom of religion or belief is a priority for the British government. “Let me be absolutely clear to the House: the government are not silent and the government are not quiet. When Christians are persecuted, we, as government ministers, speak out clearly and forcefully,” he said. “I cannot stress enough how seriously the Foreign and Commonwealth Office takes this issue, as part of our commitment to freedom of religion around the world. Promoting respect for human rights is at the very heart of the Government’s foreign policy. Where Christians or any religious believers are victims of persecution, we will condemn the violence and ask the relevant authorities to ensure that justice is served. There can be and should be no impunity for those who persecute individuals on the basis of religion or belief.”

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “This debate is hugely important in shining a spotlight on the worldwide persecution of Christians and, in so doing, highlighting the significance of freedom of religion or belief for all. The persecution of Christians has been a much over-looked issue for too long, and the severity of the situation, which is worsening in many parts of the world, has been largely ignored. We applaud those MPs who took this opportunity to be a voice for persecuted Christians yesterday, and we welcome the assurances by the Minister that this is an issue which the Government takes seriously. We look forward to working with the Government and Parliamentarians to develop practical ways of stopping persecution and promoting freedom of religion or belief for all.”