



5th March 2024. Scottish Government Debate: Scotland's Place in the World

Key Recommendations

Amnesty International UK (AIUK) welcomes the Scottish government's commitment to be a good global citizen and to promote human rights across the world as set out in its [International Strategy, Global Affairs Framework](#) and position paper '[Taking a Feminist Approach to International Relations](#)' (FAIR).

To fulfil its commitment to directly addressing human rights in international policy, Amnesty recommends the Scottish government:

- **Consistently acknowledge and respond to human rights violations in the countries it engages with,**
- **Proactively support human rights defenders (HRDs) in the countries it works in,**
- **Improve monitoring and reporting of the human rights implications of its international activity,**
- **Ensure that Scottish public funds are not contributing to the manufacture or sale of arms involved in violations of international law.**

A Human Rights Approach to International Relations Policy

"Respect for human rights and the rule of law are fundamental to our engagement with all states, especially those with whom we have concerns over human rights or rule of law abuses. This means balancing economic development with social justice."

- **Scotland's Global Affairs Framework, May 2022**

The Scottish government's [Global Affairs Framework](#) cites good global citizenship and respect for human rights and the rule of law as two key focuses of its international work. Yet some states the Scottish government engages with have deeply concerning human rights records and are environments where attacks on civic space and HRDs are increasing.

Ministers' commitment to respect for human rights and equality in international work and the Sustainable Development Goals is positive, as is the call on the UK government to embed human rights in all aspects of trade policy in the '[Vision for Trade](#)'. However, Amnesty has called for improvements to transparency and accountability around the role of human rights considerations and due diligence in the Scottish government's own decision making processes. **A clear framework should set out how and when Scottish ministers raise human rights concerns and individual cases, how the Scottish government can proactively support HRDs, and how human rights concerns are considered when**

entering into bilateral agreements, such as the recent [Memorandum of Understanding](#) with the United Arab Emirates, or indeed through engagement with governments such as Rwanda or Pakistan, where international development projects are delivered. Crucially any such framework must include a reporting mechanism to allow Parliament and civil society to scrutinise decision making.

In January 2024, AIUK wrote to the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture calling for increased transparency around how human rights are considered by Ministers and officials in their dealings with foreign governments. Read our letter [here](#).

Support for Human Rights Defenders

“We recognise the importance of the work of Human Rights Defenders in international policymaking and engagement.”

– Taking A Feminist Approach to International Relations: position paper, November 2023

AIUK has urged the Scottish government to roll out support for HRDs in external relations policy as one means of better embedding human rights considerations.

Globally there is an unprecedented surge in repression against HRDs and we call on all governments to work to support and protect them, with particular consideration given to HRDs facing specific risks such as women and LGBTI+ people, environmental, indigenous and land rights activists, journalists, and lawyers. HRDs are positive agents for change whose objectives mirror many of those set out by the Scottish government in its Global Affairs Framework and Feminist Approach to International Relations. Centering them in external policy is one of the most effective ways to create just, equal and open societies with human rights and access to justice for all.

In 2018 the Scottish government took the positive decision to fund the Scottish Human Rights Defender Fellowship, a temporary relocation programme for HRDs delivered by Dundee University and supported by civil society and protection organisations including Amnesty. This form of reactive support is crucial to its recipients, and an opportunity for Scotland to explore how it can expand work in the arena of HRD protection.

Amnesty encourages the Scottish government to further commit to developing its policy on HRD support and protection. We have called for a HRD protection strategy which details as a minimum what supportive or protective actions the Scottish government can take in partner countries where it has existing networks. This approach could be expanded to capture all international activity.

Developing a strategic approach to supporting HRDs as far as possible within the Scottish Government’s capacity will strengthen a human rights based approach to international relations in key areas:

- Ensure that the Scottish Government’s approach includes those working directly on human rights violations. HRDs often face the most risk and are the least visible as a result. A targeted strategy would set out what proactive measures the Scottish government will take to reach them with support and funding,
- Include HRDs who may not be known to larger, development focussed NGOs or Scotland based organisations,

- Recognise that HRDs working on land, environmental and indigenous people's rights face the greatest risk and seek to contribute consistently to their protection through Scotland's Climate Justice and Just Transition work,
- Specify that funding streams will be open to grassroots HRDs in partner countries, engage in direct outreach to make them aware of opportunities and how to apply; consult with HRDs on specific funding barriers, and build in safeguards to address security around the application process and receipt of grants,
- Securely facilitate contacts among HRDs and the exchange of experiences between countries and/or regions in partnership with protection organisations,
- Set out local HRD engagement plans for each partner country as part of building Global South consultation mechanisms,
- Strengthen human rights due diligence across the board by capturing specific harms faced by defenders and identifying remedial avenues when harm occurs, which may be overlooked in more general processes.

How can the Scottish government Support HRDs?

1 Promote the right to defend human rights by:

- Consistently raising cases of HRDs and human rights abuses during international visits
- Developing local HRD engagement plans for partner countries to facilitate consultation with HRDs to ensure the most up to date understanding of human rights challenges and the needs of HRDs among ministers and officials
- Meeting with HRDs visiting the UK and in international spaces
- Providing, where appropriate, visible recognition to HRDs through effective publicity, visits or invitations
- Identifying opportunities to facilitate and improve contact between HRDs and UK missions where needed.

2. Strengthening the capacity of HRDs by:

- Raising the importance of their work and protection needs in bilateral meetings and international visits when appropriate
- Facilitating contacts among HRDs and the exchange of experiences between countries and/or regions.

3. Improving access to funding directed to HRDs: This may involve adapting or opening new funding streams from Scotland's International Development or Climate Justice Funds aimed at grass roots organisations and activists working on key human rights challenges.

4. Strengthening protection arrangements for HRDs:

- Calling for the development of collective protection mechanisms
- Urging the UK to fund emergency protection mechanisms
- Supporting awareness raising of the importance of temporary relocation schemes among civil society and knowledge sharing to encourage the development of further schemes.

Due Diligence and Public Funding

[Serious concerns](#) have been raised that Scottish public funds are being granted to arms companies linked to states violating international law, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, via Scottish Enterprise.

According to Freedom of Information disclosures reported by the Ferret, no company seeking grants has failed Scottish Enterprise's human rights due diligence, including those awarded to arms and munitions companies with licences to sell to Israel and Saudi Arabia.

In the context of the unlawful attacks and violation of international humanitarian law by Israeli forces in occupied Palestinian territories Amnesty has [warned](#) there is a clear risk that arms transferred to Israel will be used to facilitate or commit serious violations of international law, including attacks that may amount to war crimes. Amnesty has called on the UK government to immediately suspend both extant licences for military equipment and technology and the issuing of new licences while Israel continues to carry out widespread serious violations including war crimes, with impunity.

Amnesty recommends that Scottish Ministers review Scottish Enterprise due diligence procedures urgently. Any sale of arms or their components to Israel risks facilitating war crimes against Palestinian civilians, and Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish government must give a cast iron assurance that no Scottish public funding is involved in that process.

Conclusion

Scotland acts as a force for good internationally, and the Scottish government has made welcome commitments to embedding human rights in its international policy.

More now needs to be done to monitor and demonstrate coherence between public commitment and action on international relations activity however. As set out above this can be achieved through:

- Consistent and outspoken support for international law and human rights and ensuring human rights are always made central to international relations policy,
- Fostering genuine partnerships with HRDs and expanding HRD support and protection,
- Demonstrating a more transparent and systematic approach to how human rights considerations impact decision making.

