

The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP  
Secretary of State for International Development  
22 Whitehall  
London, SW1E 2EG

25 September 2017

Nepal/JM

*Please quote reference on any correspondence*

Dear Secretary of State for International Development,

We are writing to express serious concern about the state of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and Freedom of Expression (FoE) in Nepal. We urge the Department for International Development (DfID) to commit to ensuring that this human right is upheld in its work in Nepal. Members named on the attached list are in support of this letter.

A number of the signatories of this letter, as Members of the DfID Select Committee, have previously visited Nepal and so have an ongoing interest in DfID's work there. Much of this work is to be commended, however, as a result of meeting Nepalese people in the country, we also have enduring concerns which are raised in this letter.

We understand that the Criminal Code Bill, which was registered in the Nepalese Parliament on 15 October 2014, was passed on 8 August 2017 and is currently awaiting the President's signature. If it becomes law, certain clauses within this Bill may pose a significant threat to FoRB and FoE in Nepal. The provisions of Clause 160 in section 9 of the Bill in particular, which restrict religious conversion, are broad enough to be invoked against a wide range of legitimate expressions of religion or belief, including the charitable activities of religious groups. We are concerned that this may reduce the space in which religious Non-Governmental Organisations can work and consequently have a detrimental impact on the delivery of aid, as well as any peace and reconciliation programmes in the country.

We have already seen threats to FoRB and FoE in Nepal, as occurred in the Charikot case in June 2016, when eight Nepalese Christians were charged with attempting to convert children after sharing a comic book on the story of Jesus at the end of an earthquake trauma relief camp. We were pleased to hear that they were acquitted of all charges in December 2016 but remain concerned that similar cases could occur in the future.

It is our concern that this Bill shows an inconsistency with requirements of Articles 18 and 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Nepal is bound to implement according to its own 1991 Treaty

Act under which all ratified treaties are to be incorporated into the Nepalese penal code. We also believe that the Bill may endanger the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 16, which seeks to 'promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.'

We are additionally concerned about Nepalese religious minorities' access to land for burial. We have heard of cases in which Christian, Muslim and the Kirat communities have had to travel considerable distances to bury their dead, and even dig up and re-bury bodies. This represents a considerable public health issue and consequently threatens the realisation of Sustainable Development Goal 6 for the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.

Despite the excellent work that DfID does, in the considered view of the signatories of this letter, and particularly of those who have served on the DfID Select Committee for many years, FoRB and FoE have often not been priority issues. In view of the specific concerns expressed in this letter and our understanding that DfID has allocated a £92 million budget to its work in Nepal in 2017/18, we ask what steps DfID is taking to ensure that FoRB and FoE are fully protected and upheld through its work in Nepal?

We would be most grateful to have a response by the time Parliament returns on 9th October, as this would help inform action – such as calling for debate time – which a number of concerned Members are considering following Conference Recess. We would also welcome the opportunity to have a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss these matters further.

Yours Sincerely,

**Fiona Bruce MP**  
**Member of Parliament for the Congleton Constituency**  
[www.fionabruce.org.uk](http://www.fionabruce.org.uk)