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Ahmadiyya Community – [Annette Brooke in the Chair]

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All Westminster Hall debates on 20 Oct 2010



Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden, Labour)

Let me start by apologising for any words that I may pronounce incorrectly. No insult is intended, and I stand to be corrected on my pronunciation. For someone with a name like **Siobhain McDonagh**, that is quite a thing.

Britain's Ahmadiyya Muslims work hard and contribute greatly to this country. Their belief in peace and religious tolerance is an example to us all, and is to be expected from a community whose motto is, "Love for all and hatred for none." Their fifth spiritual head, **Mirza Masroor Ahmad**, lives in the United Kingdom, and their headquarters are in south London. Indeed, one of the world's biggest Ahmadi mosques is in Morden. It has capacity for 10,000 people, which means that I have many Ahmadi constituents, as do many neighbouring seats. I am pleased to say that we now have the backing of enough parliamentarians to start up an all-party parliamentary group for the Ahmadiyyan community, and we will hold our first ever meeting in the next few weeks.

In my experience, my Ahmadi constituents are well-educated, cultured and have a sophisticated and peace-loving approach. I am therefore delighted to be granted this opportunity to talk about the Ahmadiyyan community. I understand that this is the first ever parliamentary debate specifically to discuss the Ahmadiyya faith, and it is a great honour to be leading it. However, I am extremely sorry to bring this community's concerns to the House at this particular time. The circumstances that led me to ask for a debate are extremely sad. On 28 May, nearly 100 Ahmadiyya Muslim worshippers were brutally murdered in two separate attacks in Lahore. However, what makes the story especially poignant is not just the fact that the Ahmadi are so peaceful

but that their murderers were also Muslim. What I hope to do today is to examine why the attacks took place, then ask whether there is anything that we in Britain and the wider community can do to prevent such atrocities happening again in the future. Finally, I want to assess what the implications are for Britain of how the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan is treated and what we can do about it.

To begin, I need to say a few words of introduction about the Ahmadiyyans. Despite the fact that they have translated the holy Koran into more than 60 languages, span 195 countries and have more than 15,000 mosques and a membership exceeding tens of millions, theirs is a faith that is little known outside their community. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community was founded in 1889 and arose out of the belief that the long-awaited Messiah had come in the person of **Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian**. Ahmad claimed to be the metaphorical second coming whose advent was foretold by Mohammed. Obviously, that contradicts the view of mainstream Muslims who believe that Mohammed is the last prophet. Nevertheless, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community is a very peaceful religion. They believe that there are parallels between Ahmad and Jesus, as God sent both to end religious wars, contend bloodshed and bring peace. For instance, they reject terrorism in any form. Ahmad declared that jihad by the sword had no place in Islam. Instead, he wanted his followers to wage a bloodless, intellectual jihad of the pen to defend Islam.

In a similar vein, Ahmadis believe that theirs is the only Islamic organisation to endorse a separation of mosque and state and to champion the empowerment and education of women. Ahmad also warned his followers not to engage in irrational interpretations of the Koran or to misapply Islamic law. In Britain today, we regard such attributes as modern and tolerant. However, those values are not shared by some other Muslim traditions, particularly those with a more fundamentalist view point. For such fundamentalists, belief in a false prophet is heretical enough, but for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community also to follow teachings that fundamentalists believe are wrong is adding insult to injury. Consequently, Ahmadis have long faced persecution. Their first martyr was killed in custody in 1901, and it is estimated that there have been about 200 deaths in total. Of course, religious disagreements have cost countless lives over the years throughout the world. Religions have a long and very unhappy history of attacking each other for worshipping the wrong prophet, even much closer to home than in Pakistan.

I am a Catholic and we are as guilty as anyone. A Catholic pope promised heaven to mediaeval thugs who took part in murderous crusades against followers of a prophet whom they believed was false-Mohammed. That period of history continues to haunt us. This country is not immune to using discrimination against religions we have not liked, with Catholics on this occasion often being the victims. It is only a few years ago that I helped to change the law to allow former Catholic priests to become MPs. Although that law was a throwback to a much earlier time, there are, even in our more recent history, examples of discrimination of which we should not be proud, particularly in **Northern Ireland**. It is hard therefore to stand here and lecture other countries about their practices, and we need to remain humble. The fact that religions have been persecuting each other for centuries does not make it right, especially in Pakistan where extreme groups such as the Taliban are already very active in creating a lot of volatility.

We are lucky in this country in that, on the whole, our religions can carry on side by side without conflict, respecting each other's right to worship. In Pakistan, most mainstream Muslims are horrified that anything could happen to their fellow countrymen just because they have a different religion. They are as shocked as we are by attacks such as those in Lahore. However, discrimination is an everyday reality for many Ahmadis living in Pakistan, and it is embedded in the Pakistani constitution.

Pakistan's founder, **Mohammad Ali Jinnah**, may have said that the country should be a secular state in which all were equal and religion was no business of the state, but today's Ahmadis do not enjoy equality. Pakistan was created in 1947. In 1948, Major Dr Mahmood Ahmed was lynched by a mob at Quetta. In 1950, Ahmadis were murdered in Charsadda, Okara, Rawalpindi and Mansehra. By 1974, riots and killings, attacks on mosques, assaults, arson and looting were widespread, and the organs of the state were not neutral. The police arrested victims and not perpetrators. **In September 1974, Prime Minister Bhutto** amended the constitution and declared that Ahmadis were officially non-Muslim. That was followed in the 1980s by measures introduced by Zia ul-Haq's Government to Islamicise Pakistan's **laws**.

In 1984, Ordinance 20 significantly restricted Ahmadi freedom of religion or expression, threatening up to three years in jail for any Ahmadi who, for example, called themselves a Muslim. Since then, thousands of Ahmadis have been arrested. In 1989 and again in 2008, the entire 50,000 population of the Rabwah was charged with practising Islamic worship. Ahmadis are prevented from holding public meetings and are not even able to vote or to register to

vote because registering to vote would require them to deny their faith. Ahmadis are barred from entry to public office except at the lowest level. In order to claim to be a Muslim on the Pakistani passport, they are forced to sign a declaration that says:

"I consider Mirza Ghulam Ahmad to be an imposter."

Persecution by the state is at times systematic. My fear is that such discrimination helps to feed the ideology of groups such as the Taliban and offers them a justification for some of their worst excesses. It does not legitimise what they do, but it might make them feel, wrongly, that they have some kind of legitimacy. Even if there was no violence, it makes Ahmadis feel threatened. Therefore, the Pakistan constitution poses a problem, as it gives some perverse encouragement to extremists and belittles the Ahmadi community.

Non-state persecution of Ahmadis is very worrying and appears to be growing. According to Pakistan's Human Rights Commission, Ahmadis face the worst treatment of anyone in Pakistan. The media there are often virulently anti-Ahmadi, broadcasting phrases such as, "Ahmadis deserve to die." In particular, the **Khatme Nabuwwat** movement carries out regular activities to oppose **Ahmadi Muslims**. It calls for the banning of Ahmadiyyat and for the killing of Ahmadis. It incites attacks against Ahmadis in speech and broadcast, and is credited with introducing the widely used phrase, "wajibul qatl" which means "those who deserve to be killed".

In the past decade, there has been an increasing number of murders and attacks of Ahmadis, and an increase in the number of pre-planned and targeted attacks on Ahmadi mosques by Islamist militants. As we know, those attacks culminated in the Lahore attacks, when two mosques were stormed in a well-planned assault that lasted for about four hours. At one stage, more than 1,000 worshippers were trapped in the Darul Zikr mosque, trying to escape militants armed with guns and grenades. The **Baitun Noor** mosque was also stormed in a co-ordinated attack. The multiple suicide attacks by the **Punjabi Taliban** took place slowly, with terrorists methodically throwing hand-grenades among their hostages and climbing the minarets to fire at them from above. When the attackers started to run out of ammunition, they began detonating their explosive vests. Although the police came, they arrived late-even after the media arrived-and the only attackers who were caught were captured by unarmed Ahmadis.

The loss of life and the prolonged and bloody siege prompted widespread condemnation and global media coverage, and it is the reason why we have

asked for this debate today. Many people have been in touch with me about the outrage in Lahore. Shortly after the murders, I spoke personally with Rafiq Hayat, the head of the UK's Ahmadi community. I wanted him to know that I was very concerned about what had happened and I wanted to see if I could do anything more to help.



Henry Smith (Crawley, Conservative)

In my **constituency**, the attacks in Lahore in May sent a shockwave through the local Ahmadi community. However, I was very impressed that, despite that sense of shock, several months later the community displayed its altruistic and inclusive nature when it invited representatives of many different faiths in my **constituency**-Christian, Hindu, Sikh and Muslim-to come together for a celebration at the end of Ramadan. Is that not a great example of the way forward and of how we can include all communities together, with respect for all different faiths and religions?



Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden, Labour)

I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman and, as I have been arguing, such inclusiveness is the hallmark of the Ahmadi faith.

We thought that it was important that Britain send a strong message to Pakistan after the attacks in Lahore, saying that we were appalled by what had happened and that more must be done to support Ahmadi worshippers in that country. At the time of the attacks in Lahore, we were concerned that the **British Government** should highlight both Pakistan's duty to protect Ahmadis and the poor treatment that Ahmadis receive in Pakistan. As my right hon. Friend **David Miliband** said when he was my party's foreign affairs spokesperson:

"It is when the international community has taken its eye off the ball in Pakistan that instability has increased...Internally, Pakistan has a duty to protect minority groups and needs the support of its allies to do so."

Rafiq Hayat told me that he agreed with that sentiment and I hope that the **Minister** can join us in expressing the Government's views to the **Pakistan Government** in his speech later in the debate.

I am concerned that the discrimination against Ahmadis that is embedded in the Pakistani constitution can be construed by militants as giving them legitimacy. The **Pakistani Government** are already facing many difficulties with al-Qaeda and other militant groups, and the British Government need to work hard to convince them to help to fight global Islamic terrorism. As the June issue of *Terrorism Monitor* notes:

"As the Pakistani Taliban are trying to spread their war on the Pakistani state, they are likely to continue to target minorities like the Ahmadis in their efforts to create instability."

If we do not persuade mainstream politicians in Pakistan to stand up for the Ahmadi Muslim community, we risk further Islamicist militancy. Moreover, if the militancy continues in Pakistan, it not only threatens Ahmadis but the whole international community. After all, any increase in Islamicist activities also affects us here in the UK, so it is in our own interests for the Government to seek to persuade Pakistan's Government to show more tolerance to the Ahmadi Muslim community.

I therefore urge the **Minister** to ask his colleagues to raise this matter with Pakistani Ministers in the course of their regular meetings and to keep the new all-party group informed of any progress. The truth is that the Pakistani extremists' hatred of Ahmadis is already being exported. In fact, it is here in the UK today.

Last week, south London local newspapers carried front page articles about discrimination against and intimidation of Britain's Ahmadi community. The police are appealing for information about inflammatory leaflets that have been distributed across south London, apparently by **Khatme Nabuwwat**, as part of a targeted ideological campaign, and they have said that an investigation into alleged hate crimes is ongoing. They have also said that a teenage Ahmadi girl gave them a statement, claiming that a leaflet that was written in Urdu said:

"Kill a Qadiyani and doors to heaven will open to you".

Another **KN** leaflet, entitled "Deception of the Qadiyani", was recently displayed in the window of the Sabina Hair and Cosmetic shop in Mitcham road, Tooting. When the local *Guardian* newspaper confronted staff at the shop to ask why they had put up the leaflet, a worker said:

"These people are not Muslims. I did it myself. They don't believe that prophet Mohammed is the last prophet."

Many Ahmadi shopkeepers are worried about the future of their businesses after clerics demanded a boycott of their shops. Imam Suliman Gani, of the Tooting Islamic Centre, apparently pleaded with the owner of the Lahore halal meat shop in Tooting not to sell his business to an Ahmadi man, saying:

"Since the Qadiyanis are routinely deceptive about their religion, there was a potential risk of Muslims being offered meat that wasn't necessarily halal."

Yet another leaflet that was posted on the wall of the Streatham mosque called for a boycott of the Lahore halal meat store.

The discrimination is increasing. An Ahmadi butcher who came to London in 2001 after fleeing Pakistan has just won an employment tribunal after being sacked by the owner of the Haji halal meat shop in upper Tooting. The owner, **Azizur Rahman**, had put pressure on his employee to convert to the Sunni Muslim faith. Apparently, Mr Rahman said that pressure was placed on him

"by the head of the Sunni sect who had helped Mr Rahman to gain admission for his daughters to a single sex school for girls."

Mr Rahman also claimed that he had been influenced by a conference hosted by KN at the Tooting Islamic centre in March, where worshippers were ordered to boycott Ahmadi-run shops. During that conference, the KN's Abdul Rehman Bawa said:

"I don't know why our sisters or mothers are talking with these Qadiyani and making friendships...Don't make friends with them...They are trying to deceive you, they are trying to convert you from Islam to Qadiyanism."

According to the local *Guardian* newspaper, the owner of one Tooting halal butchers shop said that his trade had virtually halved in three months, and claimed:

"Some people refuse to come here just because I am Ahmadi. They use words against me like 'Kafir', which means I am not Muslim. I've lived here for 13 years and lots of people know me in Tooting, but this situation has become so much worse now."

Furthermore, the Tooting Islamic centre was at the centre of another controversy, when an election hustings in April was disrupted by anti-Ahmadi protests. The **Tory** candidate was mistaken by a group of fundamentalists for the **Liberal Democrat** candidate, who is an Ahmadi, and he had to be locked into a room for his own safety.

I appreciate that not everything that appears in the newspapers is the whole truth and that the real story about anti-Ahmadi activities in this country may be more complicated and untypical. I also do not want to focus on Tooting any more than anywhere else, because I have lived in the Tooting area all my life and there is nowhere else in the world that I would prefer to live. My own experience is that the vast **majority** of mainstream Muslims are wonderful people and respect their local communities in peace.

We are still a long, long way from a Lahore-style attack happening in south London, but the emergence of anti-Ahmadi activity is a great concern. I ask the **Minister** to address the issue of how groups originating in Pakistan are encouraging illegal discrimination and inciting hatred in this country, and to raise it with colleagues at the **Home Office** and other agencies, including the police. None of us wants to see the Pakistani attacks repeated anywhere else. **The Pakistani Taliban** and groups such as KN have no place in a tolerant society and Ministers must exploit all this country's diplomatic skills to work with the Pakistani Government.

In the UK, most of the time, people from different religions live side by side, even though we each believe that the other worships a false prophet. I include the vast **majority** of the mainstream Muslim community in that. Muslims are among the most peaceful, tolerant and understanding people in our community, and I say that as a south London MP with a very diverse **constituency**. However, for the sake of Ahmadis here and in Pakistan we must work towards a greater understanding of the Ahmadi Muslim community.

I hope that the **Minister** can make a commitment today to raising our concerns with his colleagues in the Home Office and the **Foreign Office**, with the police, with the Pakistani Government and with the Commonwealth. I also hope that our new all-party group will contribute towards a greater understanding of Ahmadis, because our aim is for the whole world to share and respect the Ahmadi slogan, "Love for all and hatred for none".

2:49 pm



Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington, Liberal Democrat)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mrs Brooke. I congratulate **Siobhain McDonagh** on securing this debate. In spite of our political differences, we often make common cause on issues. I hope that she

will therefore welcome the fact that the funding for **St Helier** hospital has been re-announced in today's comprehensive spending review; that is a success that she can share with me and, indeed, with the **Minister** of State, **Department of Health**, my hon. Friend **Paul Burstow**. I am also pleased to make common cause with the hon. Lady in supporting the Ahmadiyya community. I support her work and welcome the fact that she is setting up an all-party parliamentary group on the issue. I am happy to be a member of that group and to facilitate its establishment.

In her opening remarks, the hon. Lady outlined well the position of the Ahmadiyya community around the world and the difficulties and risks that Ahmadiyyas face in seeking to practise their peaceful religion in various countries. Like her, I have had the pleasure of visiting the mosque in Morden. I went a couple of weeks ago with my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam, who I know would have wanted to participate in this debate if his ministerial duties had not kept him elsewhere. We talk a lot about the big society at the moment. The building of the mosque is a good example of how a community can work together and draw on the resources at its disposal. It is a mosque of great stature and presence, and it sets an example for the rest of us. Hon. Members who visit can see the library, the **TV** station and the facilities for both men and women to worship.

I also welcome the fact that in a similar big-society vein, the Ahmadiyya community is working locally with other faiths to secure a large open space immediately opposite the mosque for the widest possible community use. For me, that is the thing that resonates most and comes across most strongly about that community: the willingness to work with other faiths and people of no faith on issues that are important to us all. That is one of the community's strengths that we should respect, which is why it is particularly depressing that, as the hon. Lady described, Ahmadiyyas face such risks and challenges around the world and, increasingly, in the UK. I will not repeat the examples that she quoted, but I will say one thing about the incident at the Bentall centre in Kingston. Those who know Kingston will know that if people are inciting hatred and potentially putting lives at risk in the Bentall centre, we have a wider problem in the country as a whole. One could not find a more affluent middle-class environment than the Bentall centre.

When the **Minister** responds, will he clarify what discussions he is having with the **Home Office** about the issue, particularly in relation to the Prevent agenda? The Prevent agenda-it is currently under review, which I welcome-is about preventing extremism from developing within communities. It seems to

me that there is a risk of that at present, and I hope that he has had or will have discussions with the Home Office about how the Prevent agenda can be brought to bear on the issue. He might also be able to comment on the **YouTube** clips. I do not know whether he has had an opportunity to see them; I recommend that he does so, and that he reads the translations provided. He might then want to reflect, if he has not already done so, on whether there are implications under the **Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006** for some of the statements being made.

That is where I shall leave my comments, as many other hon. Members clearly want to speak. What I have seen on YouTube seems to go beyond a discussion about the relative merits of religions, which is what I think we all want to facilitate, and the Home Office and **Foreign and Commonwealth Office** need to respond to that agenda. I hope that we will hear a forceful response from the **Minister** shortly.

2:55 pm



John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington, Labour)

I apologise for being absent, Mrs Brooke; I will be chairing a meeting at half-past 3, so I will miss the Front- Bench responses. I congratulate my hon. Friend **Siobhain McDonagh** not just on securing this debate but on her continued commitment to the Ahmadiyya community over the years and her dedication to a **constituency** that she clearly loves, although she could relocate to Hayes. For me, the issue is fairly straightforward. In this debate, we are setting the agenda for our new all-party group. The two issues topmost on that agenda will be the discrimination that might be occurring in this country and attempts to divide our communities, but the attacks in Pakistan are also an issue. Over the years, many of us have signed early-day motions on discrimination, but we are deeply shocked by the attacks in Lahore. I think the head count was 94 dead and at least 100 injured, some very seriously. The severity and scale of the attacks gave us a shock.

All parties have made representations to the **Pakistani Government** about discrimination against Ahmadiyyas, as did the previous and incoming Foreign Secretaries, but we still have had no movement on some key issues. First, working with **Human Rights Watch**, we asked for the repeal of the blasphemy **laws** in order to eradicate them from the Pakistani legal system. Secondly, we mentioned the failure over years to prosecute the perpetrators of attacks on

the Ahmadiyya community. I am aware of no prosecution in the past 15 years in Pakistan for a serious attack on members of that community. Thirdly, we attempted to see how we could work with the Pakistani Government to combat persecution and harassment overall and understand in greater depth the motivations for such attacks. In many cases, it is small groups of extremists who perpetrate such attacks, but a culture of victimisation, persecution and discrimination against the Ahmadiyya community has also built up in Pakistan and infiltrated other communities around the world. I will welcome any Ministers who come along to the early meetings of the all-party group to report on the progress that they have made in their representations to the Pakistani Government on those three issues.

We are now encountering problems in this country. My **constituency** has a relatively small but active Ahmadiyya community. I convene a regular meeting of religious leaders in my community every couple of months. The Ahmadiyyas are active representatives who have involved themselves in every community campaign and every charitable act and target that we have set ourselves, ranging from getting involved in local community groups and festivals to running marathons. They are excellent contributors to the local community. The Ahmadiyyas in my area have set up a centre in the **constituency** of **Mr Randall**. It has taken over the old Irish centre, of which I was a member, the Irish community there having moved elsewhere. I will miss having a pint of Guinness there, but I welcome the centre. Immediately the centre was established, it opened its doors to the wider community. We had a session there a few weeks ago on the theme, "Love for all, hatred for none" in which representatives from the local community and all religions were invited in for a genuine discussion of local issues that we should address together. It demonstrated the commitment of the Ahmadiyya community to my local area. We have also launched an ad campaign in Uxbridge featuring "Love for all, hatred for none" on the sides of buses. In addition, the Ahmadiyya community leafleted every house in my **constituency** with a similar message of peace. In my area, all that work is establishing the Ahmadiyya community in a very close, warm and encouraging relationship with the wider community. However, there are real fears about what has happened in south London and that the situation will infect the wider community, resulting in further victimisation, discrimination and, indeed, persecution of the Ahmadiyya community in this country.

For that reason, I hope that the second item on our all-party group agenda will be about receiving a report back from Ministers on the issues surrounding

liaison, through the **Home Office**, with the Metropolitan police. What monitoring of these activities is going on, and what intelligence do we have? We then need to consider how to devise a strategy to deal with the matter. The problems under discussion are based on profound ignorance, which some elements within our society are willing to exploit to their advantage. If we can nip that in the bud at the earliest opportunity, combating discrimination against the Ahmadiyya community may shine as an example that could well provide us with lessons we can learn from in relation to Pakistan and elsewhere.

3:00 pm



Jane Ellison (Battersea, Conservative)

I congratulate **Siobhain McDonagh** on securing an important and timely debate. In my **constituency** of Battersea, like so many London seats, there are communities of people who have come to the UK from all over the world—some many decades ago and some more recently. During the four years that I was a candidate and in the five months that I have been an MP, I have met and visited a number of different faith communities to get to know them and understand their concerns. The Ahmadi are one of those communities. Although I was previously unfamiliar with the beliefs and traditions of the Ahmadiyyan faith, from my first introduction to the community I have been made very welcome and kept well informed. I am grateful to the Ahmadiyyan national president Mr Rafiq Hayat, my local Battersea president Mr Tariq Uppal and my friend Tariq Ahmed for the efforts they and others have made to keep me briefed about issues of interest and concern. I am also grateful to them for ensuring that I know more about the Ahmadi and the important role that they play in the life of this country and my local community.

The London mosque, a very long established place of worship and the site of the head office of the Ahmadiyyan Muslim Community UK, is in my neighbouring **constituency** of Putney. The Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend **Justine Greening**, is currently in the main Chamber, but she has a long-standing and positive relationship with the Ahmadi community and is taking a close interest in this afternoon's debate.

I was aware of the long-standing tension that exists between some other Muslim faith groups and the Ahmadi Muslim community, especially in Pakistan where—as has been mentioned—persecution of the Ahmadis is, sadly, written into the constitution. However, it was still a huge shock and very distressing to

hear of the Lahore massacres in May. They have been described already. Those worshippers were murdered with grenades, suicide vests and automatic weapons. As we heard, many people were killed and injured. Tragically, a local Putney resident—a much-loved husband and father, Mr Muhammad Bilal—was one of those people murdered.

Although one of our fellow citizens was caught up in the dreadful events in Lahore, it is always tempting to look at bad things happening in a foreign land and hope that we might somehow be insulated from them. We might be tempted to think that such events spring from a tradition very different from our own and that it could not happen here. However, this country has long-standing and very close political and diplomatic ties with Pakistan, which have been reinforced through the bonds of friendship and family over many decades. That has been manifested in many positive ways. Most recently, there has been a hugely generous response from the British people to the devastating floods that affected millions of people in Pakistan.

However, there have also been some less welcome developments that have resulted in part from the ongoing close ties of culture and religion between Pakistan and its diaspora. The Ahmadi Muslim community in the UK has noticed that disturbing trend in the months since the Lahore massacres. As has been alluded to, the persecution of Ahmadis has intensified in tone and frequency around our country, particularly in south-west London. There have been the incidents described today of intimidation during the **general election**, and posters and leaflets with aggressive and derogatory messages have appeared around the area. I have been shown images of posters put up in Scotland that denounce Ahmadis as infidels and publish their place of worship. That leaves those observing the poster to read between the lines.

As the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden has said, many local newspapers, including the *Wandsworth Guardian*, have reported on organised boycotts of Ahmadi-owned businesses. Much of the written material that has appeared treads a conscious line between what is illegal and what is merely very unpleasant. A recent **Ofcom** investigation into provocative broadcasts by faith-based satellite **TV** channels was hampered by uncertainty about where some programmes had been shown. Translation has also sometimes proved a problem, with the exact nuances of some terms often disputed, even though the intent is obvious. I ask my hon. Friend the **Minister** to keep a close liaison with the **Secretary of State** for Culture, Media and Sport with regard to broadcasting guidelines to ensure that loopholes are not exploited in such a way. I am certainly confident that we are not talking about restricting the right

of free speech; we are talking about ensuring that people do not exploit loopholes to do the very opposite of the notion of free speech.

Whatever the details of individual events, we do not have to read too far between the lines to see that a deeply worrying trend is developing.

Throughout history, we have seen where such trends have led. Indeed, we are reminded by the origins of the word "boycott" of the sectarian divisions that have scarred Ireland for many centuries. We must speak out now against persecution at home and abroad. Rather than keep our silence or let things be too low key, we must speak out before it is too late and further tragedies take place abroad or here.

I do not know, and actually I do not care, about the doctrinal differences that underpin so much of this unpleasant activity. I care about this country's tradition of religious tolerance, which we were rightly reminded earlier is still evolving and is not perfect. Nevertheless, we can take some pride in it. That tradition must embrace and protect the Ahmadi community, as it has protected other religious groups before. It is a tradition of religious tolerance that we urge Governments around the world to adopt and that our own Government should encourage at all times. I am sure the **Minister** will touch on that.

In the UK, I welcome the measures already taken by the borough commander of Wandsworth police to investigate what is happening in my local community. That investigation was urged by my hon. Friend the Member for Putney and others, and is supported by Wandsworth council, as well as many councillors and community leaders. There is more that can and should be done by all **Members of Parliament** to give leadership to attempts to combat rising intolerance. I will certainly be playing my part, and I am glad that this debate has offered us all the opportunity to draw attention to this very grave matter.

3:06 pm



Nicholas Dakin (Scunthorpe, Labour)

I will contribute briefly to the debate, because most of the points have already been very well made by other hon. Members. I represent Scunthorpe county **constituency**. Picking up the point that my hon. Friend **Siobhain McDonagh** made in initiating the debate, prejudice is unfortunately something that we must live and work with in all our communities and get the better of through tolerance.

A few years ago, an Ahmadi community came to Scunthorpe and applied for planning permission for a mosque. That drew huge objections from the local community. However, the planning application was perfectly correct and went through. The mosque was built and those who lived in the community got on with their lives. A few months after the mosque had been established and opened, the neighbour who had led the series of objections knocked on the door of the mosque. They said to the person who answered the door, "I just wanted to apologise for having led that process of objection because you have been fantastic neighbours. You contribute to the community and we are proud to have you as our neighbour."

That little story demonstrates the way in which prejudice is often overcome by people living together and becoming more knowledgeable about each other. The sadness of the situation in Pakistan is that that does not appear to be the case. I agree with the comments already made: whatever the **British Government** can do in working with the Pakistani authorities to try to address the concerns about intolerance and violence towards the Ahmadi community in Pakistan would be very welcome. We must be ever-vigilant in this country to ensure that our tradition of religious tolerance is protected and celebrated. We must also ensure that the incidents that we have sadly heard about this afternoon and that have been reported more recently in the press do not increase. We must ensure that such incidents lessen, so that there is an increased growth in tolerance. Thank you for letting me contribute to the debate, Mrs Brooke.



Annette Brooke (Mid Dorset and North Poole, Liberal Democrat)

Would any other hon. Member like to make a contribution? If not, I call **John Spellar**.

3:09 pm



John Spellar (Warley, Labour)

It is a pleasure to address **Westminster Hall** for the first time from the **Front Bench** as a deputy member of the Labour party's **Foreign and Commonwealth Office** team. It is also a pleasure to face the **Minister**, who strikes the right balance between being properly partisan-I heard him shouting

and bawling from the Back Benches when he was in **opposition**-and always being seen as competent and, even more significantly, fair-minded. Perhaps I can compromise him further with his Whips Office by saying that there is a compromising picture of him and me opening **Paula Radcliffe** way in his **constituency**. I can assure him, however, that normal service will resume in later exchanges on the Floor of the House.

It is also a pleasure to respond to my hon. Friend **Siobhain McDonagh**, who once again showed her qualities as a tenacious campaigner. She has turned a marginal seat, which was previously not held by the Labour party, into a safe seat, and that is based on the enormous service that she has given her constituents. She has demonstrated again today her engagement with them and the battles that she has fought on their behalf.

My hon. Friend has not only raised an important issue, but paid proper tribute to members of the Ahmadi faith, their contribution to community life in her **constituency** and their success in founding businesses and being part of economic life in her **constituency** and the country. My hon. Friend is right to be proud of that success, but as I often tell groups and individuals in my **constituency**, we can also be proud of the fact that we live in a country where such success is possible. There are a whole number of reasons for that, and we must fight to defend our values and customs so that such things remain possible and groups can succeed.

People of different faiths, beliefs and races can live peacefully side by side in this country. I was very much taken by the contribution of my hon. Friend **Nic Dakin**, who spoke of a group that had led a campaign against a mosque. Its members recognised that they had been wrong, but more importantly, they felt that it was right to convey that to the Ahmadi community. I am not sure how many other countries that would happen in. It is particularly telling that even those who have sometimes had prejudices and strong views can recognise when they have made a mistake. That is not true of everyone by any means, and there will always be a minority in society who are bigoted and driven by hatred, but the great **majority** of people in all communities want to live peacefully. We must work to ensure that we maintain such values and maintain that sort of country. At the same time, it strongly behoves us as individuals, political parties and state authorities to react vigorously against those, from whichever community, who would disrupt society and seek to divide it.

My hon. Friend **John McDonnell** rightly said that there are two aspects to the debate. One clearly involves the situation and relations in this country, and I

will return to that in a minute. The other is the situation in Pakistan. There is also the issue of how we handle the relationship between the two.

Obviously, it was disturbing to hear the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden and other colleagues, who told us how certain groups are trying to disrupt peaceful relations, stir up hatred, damage people's businesses and even move towards physical violence. From the examples that we have been given, that seems to be a problem mainly in the Metropolitan police area, and I certainly hope that the Metropolitan police will take it up fairly urgently. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington said, it is important to nip these things in the bud—to deal with things at an early stage, to establish norms and isolate those who are trying to cause the difficulty.

I remind **Tom Brake** that, leaving aside newer legislation, the concept of actions liable to cause a breach of the peace is long-established in legal principle. In that respect, the proprietors of a shopping centre, who may have rights within it, can work in collaboration with the Metropolitan police and/or the local council's antisocial behaviour unit. There is an excellent case for joint action to send the message, "This is not the sort of behaviour that we will tolerate in the public space in our borough or in London." We should have a strong attitude of zero tolerance towards those who would seek to stir up sectarian strife.

The second aspect that has been raised is the situation in Pakistan. I associate my party's Front-Bench team with the comments that the **Minister** has made in answer to questions over the past few months, and specifically in response to the horrific attacks on 28 May and 3 September. They were very much echoed in comments made by the previous **Foreign Secretary**, my right hon. Friend **David Miliband**, when he was **shadow** Foreign Secretary. In a quote that has been previously raised, he rightly said:

"Pakistan's security is paramount to stability in the region. It is when the international community has taken its eye off the ball in Pakistan that instability has increased.

***The European Union** needs to increase its support for Pakistan. It currently spends just half a euro per person compared to five to ten times as much in other parts of the world that are not only more developed, but less crucial to global security.*

*The **Pakistani Government's** efforts to stabilise its western provinces has seen its military stretched.*

*That Friday's attacks on the Ahmadi mosques originated in **North Waziristan**, and were carried out by suspected Pakistani Taliban militants, are areas of particular ongoing concern.*

Internally, Pakistan has a duty to protect minority groups and needs the support of its allies to do so. This is the worst attack on the Ahmadis in Pakistan's history, and it is deeply saddening that 93 innocent people have lost their lives."

That clearly reflected the previous Government's ongoing policy in March 2009, when the previous Member for Harlow, who was a Foreign and Commonwealth Office **Minister**, clearly laid out the then Government's position, which the subsequent coalition Government have followed very well. He said that his ministerial colleague had raised

"concerns about the difficulties faced by religious minorities in Pakistan, including the Christian and Ahmadi communities and the mis-use of blasphemy legislation...With EU partners we have also made a series of demarches"-

he was referring to contacts and notes-

"to the government of Pakistan on protecting religious minorities."

He said that the UK had pressed

"the government of Pakistan to promote tolerance, and take measures to protect freedom of religion or belief"

and

"called for the reform of discriminatory legislation",

which has been mentioned in the debate. He said that the UK had

*"urged the **Minister** for Minority Affairs to raise awareness about abuses against minorities and to increase their political representation at all levels."*

He added that in July 2008-this was not just a response to immediate events, but part of an understanding of the ongoing problems-the UK and its EU partners had called

*"on the government of Pakistan to specifically protect religious freedoms and human rights of the Ahmadis."-[**Hansard, 24 March 2009; Vol. 490, c. 192W.**]*

I want to press the **Minister** a little with regard to the specific event, and the occasion in May when he described the attack on the mosques in Lahore as
"a tragic example of the discrimination faced by the Ahmadiyya community"

and added:

*"Our high commissioner in Islamabad has raised the attacks and the discrimination suffered by the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan with the Chief **Minister** of Punjab along with his EU colleagues, and the issue has also been raised by our high commission with the Pakistani Ministries of Interior and Minorities."-[**Hansard, 14 June 2010; Vol. 511, c. 301W.**]*

It is not just a matter of getting agreement at national level in Pakistan; it is also a matter of recognising the significant role of provincial and local governments in protecting minorities in Pakistan. Therefore, national agreement and understanding is important, but things must go deeper, through the structures of the **Pakistan Government**.



John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington, Labour)

The most disappointing aspect of the attack this year was the fact that according to the **Human Rights Watch** report, the Ahmadi community and others in Pakistan had approached the Chief **Minister** of Punjab in advance to seek enhanced security for Ahmadi mosques. That was not provided and the mosques were vulnerable as a result, with the attack resulting in so many deaths. I concur with my right hon. Friend in trying to ensure that the message should be given not just to the **Pakistani Government**, but should be implemented at provincial level.



John Spellar (Warley, Labour)

My hon. Friend ably reinforces my point. I am sure that the **Minister** will take that on board. I hope that the steps that have been suggested will be taken, so that the message will get across at different levels in Pakistan.

The debate rightly touches on relations with Pakistan, a country with which we have long and deep links, which is a major player in an important region and a partner in responding to terrorism. Furthermore, as has been obvious during the debate, many of our citizens take a deep and informed interest in its affairs. That is shown by the huge response in the UK-not just from the community that originates in Pakistan-to the floods in Pakistan. As far as I am aware, the UK has been the second biggest donor, both in the response of individuals and in the Government response to the distress caused by the floods. That has been so throughout the country.

I was at an event a few weeks ago in my **constituency** and there were some major figures there from the Pakistani community-as well as from the other communities: Hindu, Sikh, Christian and probably a considerable number of non-believers in any faith. They made major donations to assist those whose lives have been so disrupted. It is clear that the bonds between our countries are strong, but I stress that is not to do with recreating a position based on a colonial past. Even so, we should not be averse to raising human rights issues. Nor should we make the perhaps slightly lazy assumption that in a vibrant, dynamic country such as Pakistan there is monolithic uniformity of opinion. It is undoubtedly far more nuanced and sophisticated.

It is interesting to note that an independent survey showed that about 90% of Pakistanis believe that religious extremism is the greatest single threat to the country. It seems a shame that, as someone commented, the extremist 3% seem to be holding the other 97% to ransom. It is important, therefore, that Pakistan should not be isolated from the mainstream of international community, and very important that ordinary Pakistanis should remain in contact with the outside world, and should understand that we do not believe they all follow the views of a rabid, vociferous minority.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden rightly stressed the efforts of the Taliban to destabilise Pakistan by inciting hatred and violence towards minorities, and the Ahmadi minority in particular. However, we should recognise that the Taliban are not very concerned, either, about their fellow **Sunni Muslims**. In fact, they probably hold them in greater disregard than they do other groups. They are an extremist group and are prepared to use extreme violence to impose a backward view. They are a threat to the stability of the country as well as to minorities, with the present case being the worst example of that at the moment. We should remember in this and other contexts that intolerance of others' beliefs and sectarian violence rarely stay

within the bounds of a country; they spread across frontiers. That is what is happening and that is why we need to respond in Britain.

The **Minister** has a number of questions to respond to from hon. Members who have taken part in the debate, but I ask him also to outline what steps are being taken by the **Foreign and Commonwealth Office** to convey our strong concern to the authorities in Pakistan at national, provincial and local level. I assure him of our support in getting that message across.

3:26 pm



Alistair Burt (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Afghanistan/South Asia, counter terrorism/proliferation, North America, Middle East and North Africa), Foreign and Commonwealth Office; North East Bedfordshire, Conservative)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Brooke. I thank you for presiding over the debate, and I thank colleagues who have taken part. I begin, of course, by thanking **Siobhain McDonagh** for her contribution and for raising this important subject. As **Mr Spellar** said, her commitment to her community—both the section of it to which the debate relates, and all others—is noted in the House, and brings her recognition wherever she goes. It is another part of her work that she does commendably in the House, and we thank her for bringing it to the House's attention.

I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Warley for his kind remarks. We do indeed go way back. We are both members of the Whips' brotherhood, albeit on opposing sides of the House. We have both been around for a while. I appreciated the right hon. Gentleman's work in Government. He was a good **Minister** and easy to talk to. Coming to open a road in my **constituency** of course marks him out as a special colleague, and I thank him for that. If I remember rightly, I think that I ran the 10 km race on that occasion—



John Spellar (Warley, Labour)

There are differences between us.



Alistair Burt (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Afghanistan/South Asia, counter terrorism/proliferation, North America, Middle East and North Africa), Foreign and Commonwealth Office; North East Bedfordshire, Conservative)

I was going to say that ministerial engagements prevented him from running; but it was a good occasion and I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments, which I reciprocate. Although properly partisan we are able, we hope, to put such things to one side when we need to. This is one of those occasions.

In foreign policy there are many areas in which a change in Government makes little difference to what are conceived to be British interests. As to human rights and related matters I think the House can be assured that the view of the House, the Government and the country is reflected in Government. There may be nuances from time to time, but the things that we hold valuable are shared between us. **The House** will find the **Minister** and the **Opposition** speaking together in our condemnation of the attacks that are the subject of the debate and in our concerns about what can be done in the future.

Human rights and the treatment of minorities are obviously of major concern to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden in seeking the debate, and they are important to us all. She made a powerful and at times distressing case when she discussed circumstances affecting her constituents, and events in Pakistan. Her concerns for her constituents were echoed by the hon. Members for Hayes and Harlington (**John McDonnell**) and for Scunthorpe (**Nic Dakin**) and by other hon. Members who spoke.

The United Kingdom Government are concerned about the ongoing discrimination against the Ahmadi Muslim community in Pakistan and around the world. I am grateful for the opportunity to talk to hon. Members about it. We welcome the news about the all-party group and will keep in touch with that. The hon. Lady and her fellow officers will know that they need only make contact with us and we shall respond. She recognises, through the establishment of the group, the importance of the community to many hon. Members in the **House of Commons** who have relevant **constituency** interests. I will certainly draw the **Home Secretary's** attention to the remarks have been made today concerning events that take place in the UK. I will move on to the matters affecting home affairs later, but there is no doubt that the matter has resonance both for our foreign relations responsibilities and for what happens in the UK.

I would like to put our relationship with Pakistan in perspective before dealing with the hon. Lady's specific points, because it is important, and the right hon.

Member for Warley referred to that, too. The Government are committed to a long-term, productive and friendly partnership with Pakistan. Our two countries share many strong ties: our history, the deep familial routes in our 1 million-strong **British Pakistani** diaspora, extensive business links and close cultural connections.

As we have heard, Pakistan is currently dealing with major domestic challenges. The recent devastating floods have caused an immense amount of damage and misery for more than 20 million people-misery on a scale that is difficult to contemplate in the UK, as the area affected is the size of our country. It is one of the worst disasters the world has ever seen. **The UK** has been at the forefront of the international response to the crisis, committing £134 million for urgent humanitarian relief and to help people rebuild their lives.



Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden, Labour)

Several Members have mentioned the amount of money that the British population have contributed to the relief effort in Pakistan, but we should also put on the record the work of the Ahmadis' own charity, **Humanity First**, in raising funds and providing services in Pakistan during the floods.



Alistair Burt (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Afghanistan/South Asia, counter terrorism/proliferation, North America, Middle East and North Africa), Foreign and Commonwealth Office; North East Bedfordshire, Conservative)

The hon. Lady anticipated my next point, which is about the voluntary contributions, but I would not have mentioned that charity specifically, so I thank her for mentioning it. In addition to what the Government have spent, as the right hon. Member for Warley has said, the response from the community across the UK generally, whether or not they have relationships with Pakistan, has been remarkable- £60 million from different communities up and down the country-and those with family connections have been especially involved. We will continue to do that work. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the European Union, and it is important that we work closely with it. Recently, my right hon. Friends the **Foreign Secretary** and the **Prime Minister** attended a

European summit at which they took the lead in pressing the **European Community** to do still more to improve trade agreements to enable the **Pakistani Government** not only to get over the immediate hurdle of the floods, but to look forward to re-establishing their economy and to have the right infrastructure to be able to do so. The EU was able to take our lead and produce more trade concessions, which will give significant assistance to Pakistan in the future.

Pakistan is also suffering from the scourge of terrorism. More than 3,000 Pakistanis died last year as a result of terrorist attacks. Those attacks and the groups that perpetrate them pose a grave threat to Pakistan and to the stability of the region and beyond, including the UK. I would like to repeat the words of the **Prime Minister** when he paid tribute in August to the resilience of the people in Pakistan in facing that threat. We are committed to working with Pakistan to defeat this threat. It threatens both our countries.

Human rights are at the core of our foreign policy. We raise our concerns about human rights, wherever and whenever they occur, without compromise and will continue to do so. As the Foreign Secretary made clear in a recent speech, we will improve and strengthen the work of the **Foreign and Commonwealth Office** on human rights. That will be underpinned by British values and by our support for democratic freedoms, universal human rights and the rule of law. That approach will be based on realism; we will never overlook human rights abuses and will always strive for progress, but we will be practical in our approach and flexible about what might work best in different contexts, which is only sensible.

The multiplicity of links between the UK and Pakistan means that we engage with each other on all subjects-counter-terrorism, security policy, immigration, trade, development, education, the rule of law and human rights. As I have outlined above, that last subject is critical to the conduct of UK foreign policy. It is as relevant to our relationship with Pakistan as it is to our relations with the rest of the world. We do not shirk from our responsibilities in highlighting our concerns about human rights, including to our friends.

Pakistan has made important progress in improving human rights. The ratification of the international covenant on civil and political rights and the convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and punishment is an important step in enshrining inherent rights in law, although we hope that the Government will look to remove or redraft the current reservations that they have lodged against both treaties. It is important

that those instruments are fully implemented to help to ensure the human rights of all Pakistanis.

However, Pakistan continues to face significant challenges in those areas, and we remain committed to working with the **Government of Pakistan** to address them. One of the most important challenges is discrimination against, and persecution of, those of a particular religious belief, whether Christians or Sikhs, as is sectarian violence between Sunni and **Shi'a Muslims**. It is vital that the Government of Pakistan uphold the fundamental rights of all Pakistani citizens, regardless of their faith or belief. Pakistan can only benefit if all its citizens are able to play a central role in society. We regularly reinforce that point for our colleagues in the Government of Pakistan at all levels, and they have now established a Ministry for Minorities, which has active leadership and has brought about some positive changes. A remaining critical challenge, as has been mentioned today, is the reform of Pakistan's blasphemy legislation to ensure that it is properly implemented. Misuse of those **laws** is the basis for much of the discrimination suffered by religious groups in Pakistan, as the hon. Lady made clear.



Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington, Liberal Democrat)

On discrimination, are the **FCO** and the **Department for International Development** in a position to monitor effectively whether the aid for Pakistan is being delivered equally across all communities?



Alistair Burt (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Afghanistan/South Asia, counter terrorism/proliferation, North America, Middle East and North Africa), Foreign and Commonwealth Office; North East Bedfordshire, Conservative)

The short answer is yes, and I know that because the point has come up before. If I may, I will deal with that towards the end of my remarks.

The Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan is 4 million strong. Following the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the community played an important role in the development of the new country; Pakistan's first Foreign **Minister** was an Ahmadi, and many prominent members of both **the army** and the civil service followed their faith. However, since the mid-1950s Ahmadis have faced

increasing levels of discrimination, culminating in the passage of constitutional restrictions on their way of life: in 1974 the **Pakistan Parliament** adopted a law declaring Ahmadis to be non-Muslims, and in 1984 a further ordinance was passed, forbidding Ahmadis to refer to themselves as Muslims or to "pose as Muslims." Pakistanis themselves must take the lead in legal reform of the constitutional and legislative constraints on Ahmadis. The **Government of Pakistan** have a responsibility to protect all their citizens, regardless of religion or belief. The structural nature of that discrimination helps to create an environment of intolerance that manifests itself in horrific attacks.

I turn now to the attack on Lahore that was the subject of many of the remarks made by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden. The attacks against the two Ahmadiyya mosques in Lahore on 28 May, which killed 93 people and injured more than 100, prompted a worldwide response and rightly generated widespread indignation in the UK, both from parliamentarians and the general public. The attacks, unfortunately, were among many that violent extremists have carried out against both minority and **majority** Muslims over the past few years.

The **Foreign Secretary**, as has been acknowledged this afternoon, was swift in his denunciation of the attacks. Shortly after, the British high commissioner in Islamabad raised both the attacks and the wider discrimination of the Ahmadiyya with the chief **Minister** of Punjab, **Shahbaz Sharif**. I echo the point, made by the right hon. Member for Warley, that it is important that we engage at both federal and provincial level, which we do, in order to make our points on human rights. It is essential that the message gets though everywhere.

Senior officials from the British high commission in Islamabad had regular contact with officials from the Ministry for Minorities on the matter long before the attacks took place, and continue to do so. What more, then, can we do to help end the difficulties faced by Ahmadis in Pakistan and elsewhere? Most importantly, we must engage robustly and regularly with the Government of Pakistan, and we do. Following the attacks, I met with members of the Ahmadiyya community from the UK. I had the honour of meeting the national president, Rafiq Hayat, and members of the community in my office, and I am grateful for his insights on the issue at the time. He was able to give me at first instance evidence of discrimination and attacks on the community. As a result of that, in answer to a question from **Tom Brake**, I contacted the **Home Secretary** and briefed her about the matter so that she was able to take it into her calculations and her concerns about extremism in the United Kingdom. I

shall ensure that a copy of today's debate goes to her, with emphasis on the remarks that have been made.



Mary Macleod (Brentford and Isleworth, Conservative)

Would my hon. Friend agree that MPs are best placed to show leadership on this issue in our local communities, and to speak out against any persecution of Ahmadis?



Alistair Burt (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Afghanistan/South Asia, counter terrorism/proliferation, North America, Middle East and North Africa), Foreign and Commonwealth Office; North East Bedfordshire, Conservative)

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. On such issues, it is clear that those of us in leadership positions have a responsibility to speak out. She put that clearly. Indeed, I thought my hon. Friend **Jane Ellison** also got it right when she said that, for most of us, differences in doctrine between those of different faiths, including **majority** faiths, are never a justification for violence or discrimination. We all have different views on many things. None of us should be able to use those differences of view as an excuse, for that is what it is, to discriminate or commit violence against others-or, if not physical violence, to use the language of abuse which all too quickly can be turned against a group of people. We have seen that in our own society and community and, sadly, worldwide.

As my hon. Friend said, we do not really care about those differences. What we care about are tolerance and the principles of respect for different views, protection under the law and freedom from fear. Those are the things that matter to people in the UK, and within that we allow people to hold their different views. If those principles are transgressed, we are all violated to some degree, and that is why we will continue to speak out so clearly.

I shall draw to the attention of my right hon. Friend the **Home Secretary** the matters raised here that affect the UK, because they indicate a degree of fear and concern in the Ahmadiyya community that must be recognised and discussed in those places where that community might be under threat. This

debate has done a valuable job in bringing forward the issues affecting people in this country as well as abroad.

I conclude by going back to the Pakistan side of things and saying a little more about the matters raised by the right hon. Member for Warley. Together with our EU colleagues, we have a regular human rights dialogue with the **Government of Pakistan** in which the continuing mistreatment of religious groups features strongly. I have been disturbed to hear about reports from the leadership of the Ahmadiyya community of discrimination which continues to be suffered both here and abroad, and we mention them when speaking to those we deal with from Pakistan. They are aware of the knock-on effects in the UK of comments and discrimination in Pakistan.

I speak regularly to Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's Federal **Minister** for Minorities—most recently, just last week. The work that he is doing to reform the blasphemy **laws** is incredibly important, and we support him wholeheartedly in it, but I do not think that any of us have any false expectations. We recognise just how difficult it is to deal with such **laws** in a culture that has been turned against minorities and against the Ahmadiyya community. Despite the strenuous efforts of many in that Government to say and do the right things, it is hard to get such things through.

Trying to change the blasphemy **laws** provides perhaps the best opportunity for a change in attitude. I have raised the treatment of Ahmadi in Pakistan with the Pakistani **Minister** and, through him, have been monitoring the progress of the case against those accused of the Lahore bombings. The Government of Pakistan must ensure that the investigation and legal process are open, transparent and credible.

I spoke to the high commissioner for Pakistan at lunch time, to inform him of this debate and to get an assurance from him that he takes these matters extremely seriously. He wanted to communicate to me just how seriously his Government take these issues and this case, and I put that before the House. I commend the recent report by the all-party group on human rights on their recent investigation into the treatment of Ahmadi in Pakistan, and I note its recommendations. The members of that group will be pleased to learn that the British high commission in Islamabad has been funding a project to increase the capacity of law enforcement officials, Government representatives and civil society to implement and monitor proper procedure in blasphemy cases. That is a way in which we can use the **Foreign Office** budget directly and practically to build capacity, and to assist those who would like to see change to achieve it.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington discussed media reports that aid for the victims of the flooding in Pakistan is being denied to some religious groups. That is very disturbing. **The UK** is committed to ensuring that the aid that we provide reaches those who need it most. Access to aid should not be predicated on religious or political belief, which is a principle to which all humanitarian organisations and non-governmental organisations delivering UK aid subscribe. The **Department for International Development** closely monitors how our aid is distributed and undertakes strict checks on the organisations that we fund, to ensure that our aid is spent properly and delivers the intended results. I welcome the commitment by the Government of Pakistan to ensure the equitable distribution of aid to those in need, and look forward to their adhering to that principle.

Discrimination against or marginalisation of any group because of their religion or belief is not acceptable. The UK is consistent in condemning all such instances when they occur, and I know that hon. colleagues on both sides of the House support that. The Government are aware of and critical of the discrimination faced by the Ahmadiyya in Pakistan. We are committed to working with the Ahmadiyya community, **NGOs** and the Government of Pakistan on the issue in a spirit of openness and understanding. Accordingly, I thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden for bringing the matter to the House, and assure her that she will have our support in taking it forward in the future.



Annette Brooke (Mid Dorset and North Poole, Liberal Democrat)

I thank all the contributors to the debate.

Sitting suspended.