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Statement by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association at the conclusion of his visit to the United Kingdom

London (21 April 2016) - I would like to once again thank the Government of the United Kingdom (UK) for inviting me to undertake this official follow-up visit from 18 to 21 April 2016, which is a follow up to my initial visit in January 2013¹.

This is the first follow-up mission I have conducted during my tenure as Special Rapporteur, and I commend the Government for its continued willingness to constructively engage on human rights in general and on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association in particular.

It is clear that the UK takes its role as one of the global leaders in human rights seriously. Many people around the world look to the UK as a model for democracy and human rights. The world notices when this country takes positive steps to strengthen its practice of human rights. But it notices even more when it moves in the opposite direction – restricting the space for democracy and human rights.

Let me thank the Government for its excellent cooperation in organizing the mission, short as it was. A remarkable number of meetings were set up with members of the executive and legislative branches, and independent institutions, over the past four days. The input and assistance of these officials was extremely helpful. Given the brevity of the visit, I only looked at the situation in England.

I would also like to thank the many activists, members of civil society and other non-governmental interlocutors who took time out of their busy schedules to meet with me. These individuals were a diverse group, coming from many walks of life, working on a diverse range of issues, and hailing from a multitude of different backgrounds – religious, cultural, ethnic and otherwise. I have been struck by their shared passion and commitment to making their communities better.

This kind of “unity through diversity” is what civil society is about. I believe that these individuals – and the hundreds of thousands of people like them – are the reason for many of the positive attributes that are enjoyed in this country. The UK truly should consider its civil society a national treasure.

I appreciate that the Government has made efforts to address some of the recommendations I made three years ago.

However, my impression at the conclusion of this visit is that a series of separate measures by the Government, some implemented and others proposed, are resulting in the closing of space for civil society. I am concerned that, put together, these measures suggest that Government has a negative view of civil society as a critical partner that can and should hold Government accountable.

These moves have not always made headlines and in many instances, they have been subtle and gradual. But they are as unmistakable as they are alarming.

Allow me to address a number of specific areas of concern, all of which will be covered more comprehensively in my report to the Human Rights Council in June 2017.

Freedom of Association

Countering extremism and terrorism

In my 2013 report, I expressed concern that the definition of “domestic extremism” was too broad and that peaceful protestors feared that they could be easily grouped in this category alongside real and violent extremists. From my discussions with civil society and government during this visit, I do not believe enough has been done to alleviate this concern.

The major issue today, it seems, is the Government’s focus on countering “non-violent extremism” without a narrow and explicit definition. The concerns raised by a number of interlocutors on certain aspects of the *Prevent* strategy are illustrative.

Prevent focuses on individuals and groups that appear contrary to the “British Values” of democracy, pluralism and tolerance and who are seen as being predisposed to respond to terrorist ideologies.

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