November 2018

Dear Constituent,

Thank you for contacting me about Asia Bibi (Aasiya Noreen).

The news from Pakistan of the release of Asia Bibi will be very welcome to her family and to all those who have campaigned in Pakistan, and indeed around the world, for her release. I know the UK Government remains deeply concerned by the misuse of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan and the fact that religious minorities are disproportionately affected. The harsh penalties for blasphemy, including the death penalty, add to these concerns. I am encouraged that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office regularly raises human rights concerns with the Government of Pakistan at a senior level; and has urged them to take steps to prevent the misuse of the blasphemy laws. The Minister for the Commonwealth and the UN, Lord Ahmad, discussed our concerns about Freedom of Religion or Belief and the protection of minority religious communities with Pakistan's Human Rights Minister, Dr Shireen Mazari, in September.

I understand that there have been calls for the UK to grant asylum to Asia Bibi and her family. The UK and the EU approach to asylum and refugee claims is for the individual to apply for protection from the first available safe country or through the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Under the UK's Immigration Rules there is no provision for permission to be granted to travel to the UK to seek asylum. I understand that the UK Government has been working to help Asia Bibi since her release. The Home Office does not comment on individual cases but media reports suggest that asylum has not been offered by the UK authorities.

The UK's long-standing position on the death penalty is well known: we call for its abolition globally.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me.

Yours faithfully,

CHRIS HEATON-HARRIS MP
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR DAVENTRY

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