

British Prime Minister praised for recognizing Christian persecution



Prime Minister David Cameron drew praise from a Catholic group after he acknowledged that government funding should be axed to countries that persecute Christians as well as gay communities.

“That the Prime Minister should publicly single out treatment of Christians as a factor in decisions on UK aid is an important step forward,” said Neville Kyrke-Smith, director of Aid to the Church in Need's U.K. office.

In an Oct. 30 broadcast of BBC 1's Andrew Marr Show, Cameron said that “British aid should have more strings attached” if it considers funding countries that persecute Christians or people with certain sexual orientations.

The Prime Minister's comments come after former British politician Ann Widdecombe spoke out against the government for enacting a double standard in cutting foreign aid to countries that discriminate against gays but overlooking state-sponsored violence against religious minorities.

Widdecombe, a Catholic convert who represented the Conservative Party as a Member of Parliament from 1987 to 2007, made her remarks at Aid the Church in Need's international conference in London on Oct. 22.

During her speech, she noted that in Pakistan, where U.K. aid will double to 350 million British pounds per year, Christian Asia Bibi has been sentenced to death for blasphemy—a case that has drawn international condemnation.

Meanwhile, U.K. International Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell has cut the country's aid to Malawi after two homosexual men were sentenced to 14 years of hard labor.

Kyrke-Smith said he “welcomed” Cameron's recent statement as well as the government's “emphasis on the importance of tying human rights into aid.”

“You cannot continue giving massive hand-outs to governments when those governments are either responsible for persecution of Christians or are turning a blind eye to it,” he said.

Both Kyrke-Smith and Widdecombe highlighted a recent report from Aid to the Church in Need showing that in 2011, 75 percent of all religious persecution worldwide was directed against Christians.

Additionally, around 105,000 Christians are killed every year for faith-related reasons.

“When the UK is setting aid budgets and is in discussion with other governments, religious freedom—in particular the persecution of Christians—should always be highlighted and discussed,” Kyrke-Smith underscored.

He also added that the “persecution of homosexuals is totally unacceptable—as is the persecution of Christians and people of other faiths.”

“In response, rather than necessarily reducing aid, the money should be re-directed away from governments with a poor track record on human rights.”

Kyrke-Smith said that aid should instead be channeled through non-governmental organizations.

“If governments are responsible for persecution or are failing to take obvious steps to prevent it, their approach raises huge questions about whether they can be trusted to give help to the poorest and most needy in society.”

“We are asked by Pope Benedict XVI to keep Christianity in the public square,” he concluded. “We are betraying our Christian heritage and letting our Christian brothers and sisters down unless we raise human rights and religious freedom issues.”

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