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Rt. Hon. Boris Johnson  
Prime Minister  
10 Downing Street  
London  
SW1A 2AA

23 January 2020

Dear Prime Minister,

On behalf of Human Rights Watch, I write to urge you to maintain a focus on human rights in your government's domestic and foreign policy agenda and to ensure that mechanisms to protect people's rights are not downgraded under your administration.

### Maintaining Human Rights Protections

In the context of Brexit, we welcome your government's commitment to maintain protections for workers' rights after the UK is no longer bound by EU law. We urge your government to make a binding legal commitment to secure protections for workers' rights, together with equality and environmental and other protections derived from EU law. We also encourage your government to deepen efforts to ensure that EU citizens resident in the UK are able to depend on their rights after Brexit.

Your government's plan for a Constitution, Democracy and Rights Commission raises questions and concerns. Amending the Human Rights Act could weaken protections for people in the UK and render domestic protections inconsistent with international law. Any revision to the Human Rights Act should take the Act's existing rights as a base and seek to build upon them, for example by introducing socio-economic rights the UK is committed to internationally, such as a right to food. The powers of the courts to review decisions by the executive should not be curbed, as doing so could leave people without a remedy when their rights are adversely affected by the state. We urge your government to consult closely with civil society as it develops plans for such a Commission.



[HRW.org](http://HRW.org)

### **Prioritising Rights in UK Foreign, Trade, and Security Policy**

Human Rights Watch welcomes the commitments that your government has made to promote human rights globally, including its efforts at the United Nations on Xinjiang, the forthcoming Magnitsky mechanism to sanction human rights abusers, the campaign on media freedom and commitment to protect human rights defenders.

Promoting respect for human rights and the rule of law is vital for the UK's place in the world after Brexit. That effort requires a deep commitment in the face of countervailing pressures, including the imperatives of trade and the need for the UK to build new partnerships. We welcome the fact that the UK has retained human rights clauses in agreements to maintain EU trading terms with some third countries after Brexit, and urge you to maintain that practice consistently and ensure that human rights clauses are included in new agreements. We recommend that you appoint a senior advisor on human rights and trade to ensure human rights clauses are monitored and enforced. Given the UK's public commitment to media freedom and human rights defenders, we urge minister and officials to speak out publicly on behalf of jailed rights defenders, journalists and peaceful activists.

A deep commitment to human rights means taking principled decisions even when there are countervailing interests. In light of the human cost of war crimes by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, we call on your government to take a definitive decision to halt all arms exports to Saudi Arabia, including those under existing licenses, until such time as the Saudi-led coalition ends its violations in Yemen, credibly investigates abuses, and holds those responsible to account. That would build on the commitment that the government made following the Court of Appeal ruling on such exports.

### **Ensuring Children and Families in the UK Have Adequate Food**

We welcome the commitment of your government to “level up” and to address the needs of vulnerable people in society. Recent Human Rights Watch research has found that children and families in the UK are going hungry, amid rising reliance on food banks and record numbers of children living in poverty. Changes to the welfare system and spending cuts since 2010 have played a significant role in this crisis. In that context, we would urge you to focus on ensuring that children and families in the UK have adequate food, and do not have to rely on private charitable assistance.

### **Protecting Women and Girls from Violence**

We urge you to make protecting women and girls from violence a priority for your government at home and abroad. We welcome the inclusion of the Domestic Abuse bill in your new legislative agenda. Work is needed on the bill to ensure it provides clear

protections for migrant women and ensures support for essential specialist services for survivors of violence. To underscore the UK's commitment, we urge your government to ratify the Istanbul Convention, an important mechanism to protect women and girls from violence signed by the UK in 2011.

We also encourage your government to renew its commitment to the Preventing Sexual Violence in conflict Initiative (PSVI). The Independent Commission on Aid Impact (ICAI) has made clear that the current PSVI model requires revision to ensure that it is effective and strategic. Revision should include multi-year funding for a long-term strategy based on input from survivors. The aim should be to ensure survivors of conflict-related sexual violence have access to comprehensive medical, psychosocial and legal services, and that perpetrators of such crimes are brought to account.

### **Ensuring Accountability for War Crimes**

The UK has historically been a leader in the development of international standards around the laws of war, including the Geneva Conventions. Those standards keep UK forces safe on the battlefield, and adherence to them is part of the rules-based international order that the UK has a national interest to defend. In that context, we urge you to ensure that any effort by your government to address "vexatious claims" does not result in statutes of limitations or other measures that would allow UK personnel involved in war crimes to escape justice. We also urge your government to redouble its support for the International Criminal Court and to defend its mandate and independence.

Human Rights Watch would welcome the opportunity to discuss these and other pressing human rights issues with you or your officials.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. Ward', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Benjamin Ward  
UK Director (Acting)  
Human Rights Watch