

MEDIA RELEASE

4 September 2014 - For immediate release

UK government must legislate to tackle corporate human rights abuse abroad

- **Opportunities this autumn for action to address slavery in supply chains and the trade in conflict minerals**

The UK government must stop relying on voluntary measures to prevent UK businesses harming people and the environment overseas, a network of leading human rights, development and environmental NGOs said today.

One year on from the launch of the UK's Business and Human Rights Action Plan, the CORE Coalition, whose members include Amnesty International, Oxfam, and WWF, is calling on the government to seize opportunities in the next few months to eradicate slavery from UK company supply chains and to end the trade in conflict minerals.

The group also wants barriers that prevent people harmed by UK companies overseas from seeking justice in the UK courts to be removed.

The UK's Business and Human Rights Action Plan, launched on 4 September 2013 by Vince Cable, Secretary of State for Business and then-Foreign Secretary William Hague, sets out the government's plans to implement the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, agreed in 2011.

Campaigners welcomed the plan but criticised the government's continued reliance on voluntary mechanisms to raise standards, and the lack of commitments to improve access to justice for overseas victims of corporate human rights abuses.

Earlier this year, leading risk analytics firm Maplecroft released data showing a 70% rise in human rights abuses globally since 2008, with workers' rights seriously compromised, and rural and indigenous communities facing land grabs and forced displacement as demand for low-cost labour and resources intensifies.

"There are still too many examples of UK business activities causing serious harm to workers and communities overseas. The government

should use opportunities this autumn to introduce effective legislation that will require business to take steps to raise standards”, said Marilyn Croser, Director of the CORE Coalition.

“It's wrong to characterise such measures as 'red tape' that will impose a burden on business. They are necessary steps to addressing business practices which are causing serious harm around the world. Legislation will create a level playing field for business and ensure that responsible firms are not placed at a disadvantage.”

The CORE Coalition is calling on government to:

- introduce new requirements for large UK companies to report on what they are doing to eradicate slavery from their supply chains, through an amendment to the Modern Slavery Bill. This is vital for dealing with abuses like the use of slave labour to produce prawns for UK supermarkets.
- back calls for a mandatory EU scheme to end the trade in conflict minerals that fund armed groups in countries including Colombia, the DRC and the Central African Republic, and which end up in hi-tech goods, including mobile phones and computers sold in the UK.
- Conduct a review of access to justice in the UK for victims of corporate abuse abroad.

Marilyn Croser commented:

“The UN Guiding Principles commit governments to providing remedies for victims of corporate human rights abuses but the majority of victims are still denied justice. By failing to deliver on this commitment, the UK government is sending a signal that British companies can act with impunity beyond our borders.”

[ENDS]

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Notes

The UK government released its Business and Human Rights Action Plan on 4 September 2013. The plan is available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/236901/BHR_Action_Plan_-_final_online_version_1_.pdf

The CORE response to the plan is at http://corporate-responsibility.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/GoodBusiness_COREcommentonUKNAP_final_Dec2013.pdf

'70% increase in countries identified as 'extreme risk' for human rights since 2008' – Maplecroft Human Rights Risk Atlas 2014
<http://maplecroft.com/portfolio/new-analysis/2013/12/04/70-increase-countries-identified-extreme-risk-human-rights-2008-bhuman-rights-risk-atlas-2014b/>