

Rt Hon Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
King Charles Street
London SW1A 2AH

7 December 2023

Dear Lord Cameron,

I write to express my deep concern both at the evidence of a systematic campaign of murder and rape directed at Israeli women by Hamas on 7 October, and the failure of the international community to clearly and unequivocally condemn these appalling acts of violence.

As you know, more than 1,200 Israelis – men, women, children and babies – were murdered in the Hamas attack on Israel and over 240 taken hostage. More than half of the hostages – including 20 women and two children under the age of 18 – remain in Hamas’ hands.

Amidst the multiple atrocities which occurred on 7 October, there is plentiful evidence of a specific effort by Hamas terrorists to perpetrate murder, rape, torture and sexual violence against Israeli women and women of other nationalities living and working in Israel. This evidence includes that of survivors, eyewitnesses, first responders and morgue workers.

Interrogations of arrested terrorists suggest that these crimes were committed on the orders of Hamas. Moreover, the fact that sexual violence was committed at multiple locations suggests it was part of a systematic effort. As the Israeli women’s rights campaigner Professor Ruth Halperin-Kaddari told the BBC this week:

“I saw footage and pictures from numerous locations of bodies whose condition were all exhibiting the same pattern of mutilation and leaving no doubt that rape was performed on these women before they were executed. This leaves no doubt that such a concentration of cases in a relatively short span of time - less than a day - in numerous locations, it could not have been unless there had there not been a plan, premeditation, to use sexual violence as a weapon of war.”

As initiatives such as the landmark 2022 Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict conference and the “16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence” demonstrate, tackling violence against women and girls around the world is a key concern of the UK government and one shared on both sides of the House.

However, the lack of a timely, clear and unequivocal international condemnation of the sexual violence committed against Israeli women is dismaying.

As you will be aware, it took over seven weeks for Antonio Guterres to call for an investigation into Hamas’ sexual violence crimes. Similarly, it took UN Women until last Friday to directly address the issue.

Eliminating “all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres” is one of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. The inability for the UN’s leading official and the UN body dedicated to women to offer a full and timely condemnation of one of the worst acts of sexual violence against women committed since the second world war doesn’t augur well for achieving this goal over the next five years.

I would be grateful if you could clarify the following issues:

First, what support is the UK government giving to Israel to help investigate these crimes, support survivors and bring the perpetrators to justice?

Second, has the UK government asked the UN secretary general and the executive director of UN Women, Sima Bahous, for an explanation as to the UN’s failure to issue a full and timely condemnation of the sexual violence perpetrated by Hamas against Israeli women?

I have always believed that sexual violence is not an issue for women alone. As the former US secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, correctly argued: “Human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights.” I would, therefore, be grateful if you can confirm that, before its retirement at the end of this month, the UK will use its seats on the UN Human Rights Council to raise this issue and secure a clear condemnation from members of the rape, murder and torture perpetrated against Israeli women by Hamas on 7 October.

Finally, the manner in which – in sharp contrast to the mantra that victims of rape and sexual assault should be believed – there appears to have been an effort to discredit, deny and minimise these crimes is appalling. This denial appears to have primarily been driven by the race and nationality of the victims and the state in which they occurred.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sharon Hodgson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sharon Hodgson MP
Labour Friends of Israel vice-chair