



FARMERS PROTEST DEBATE

Briefing Note for MPs for Monday 8 March 2021

Purpose

The purpose of this briefing note is to inform MPs of some of the issues they should raise if they are taking part in what we have termed the Farmers Protest debate that is taking place on Monday 8 March 2021 in Westminster Hall at 4.30pm.

The UK Government must do and be seen to be doing much more directly to influence the Indian authorities and take actions on the international stage with regards to the human rights violations against farmers, journalists, activists and others supporting them.

Background

Two Sikh Parliamentary lobbies were organised by the **All Party Parliamentary Group for British Sikhs** on the Farmers Protest on 28 October 2020 and a follow up on human rights violations on 9 February 2021.

A Parliamentary e-petition titled: **“Urge the Indian Government to ensure safety of protesters and press freedom”** has attracted over 115,000 signatures.

All 650 MPs have had constituents sign the petition with around 200 MPs having hundreds if not thousands of constituents sign the petition. Over 20 MPs have had a thousand or more constituents sign the petition. Around 25 further MPs have had between 500-1,000 constituents sign the petition and approximately another 150 MPs have had hundreds of constituents sign the petition.

The debate is not about the three controversial Indian farm laws themselves as this is a matter for the Indian legislature. However, domestic laws in India must be drawn up with respect to international obligations and treaties that protect farmer rights where India are signatories.

Matters to raise in the debate

The following points should be raised by MPs during the debate:

1. **We are witnessing the world’s single largest ever protest**

At its peak, an estimated 250 million protesters joined the cause in a 24-hour general strike in solidarity with farmers as hundreds of thousands of them marched to the capital in late November 2020. The farmers protest that has become a massive people’s movement is against three agricultural reform laws passed in September 2020 without consultation with farmers that threatens their livelihoods.

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The laws if implemented exploit small and medium sized farmers in favour of corporates with most Indian farmers only owning two or three acres of land. Agriculture is still the largest source of livelihood for most Indians and employs more than half the entire workforce.

In states like Punjab known as “India’s bread-basket” about three-quarters of the state’s 30 million-strong population is involved in agriculture. Therefore, these new laws present the people of Punjab and many other states with a massive problem with some describing it as a “death warrant”. We estimate almost a million British nationals and residents in the UK have families in India who are directly impacted by these protests.

2. Protesters initially stopped from taking their protest to Delhi

Hundreds of thousands of Indian farmers started gathering across the states of Punjab and Haryana from September. However, in late November when protesters, young and old, men and women decided to take their protest to Delhi they were faced by the unprecedented scenes of roads dug up, roadblocks, use of tear gas, water cannon, violence and police brutality.

Despite the intimidation and attacks the protesters were determined, resourceful and too great in number to prevent them reaching the outskirts of Delhi. The courage, spirit and generosity of the farmers who have been feeding the very police officers responsible for attacking them has resulted in them winning the battle for the hearts and minds of the people.

3. Freedom of expression, right to assemble and peacefully protest

It is important for the UK Government and the international community to speak up to protect the right of farmers in India to peacefully assemble and protest. The right to peacefully protest is an internationally enshrined fundamental human right. The Indian authorities have from the outset been using excessive force to deny the farmers their civil and political rights to express their opposition to the new laws.

Three of the major highways leading to Delhi have for the last three and half months become temporary villages or camp sites for the protesters who have come prepared for a long struggle. Tens of thousands of farmers are currently sleeping in make-shift tents, under tractors, and in tractor trolleys during the coldest winter in Delhi's recorded history. Many protestors are elderly men and women and over 200 protesters have lost their lives camping out in freezing temperatures.

4. Indiscriminate detention, disappearances and torture

The Supreme Court of India directed the Delhi police to allow the Tractor Rally on the 26 January 2021 some two months after the protest commenced. However, on the eve of the rally police vandalised tractors and vehicles to try and sabotage the protest. Barricades were put up on route to disrupt the rally and tear gas fired on protesters.

Elderly protesters were targeted and beaten with batons. Footage is available of police officers beating protesters with batons and attacking tractors and other protest vehicles with lathis in large numbers. Live ammunition was used by police against unarmed protesters in several locations resulting in several protesters being shot and at least one fatality. The use of force by the police was entirely disproportionate.

The Indian authorities should have made appropriate security arrangements for the Tractor Rally and worked with the farmer leaders to ensure the protests took place peacefully. The Indian



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Government and its security services have been negligent and there is evidence of the Indian authorities deliberately relaxing security in some places and police inciting young people who responded to the police provocation. This has been used as an excuse to unfairly crack down on peaceful protesters.

There was complete chaos during the Tractor Rally with hundreds left injured, many detained for simply protesting and over 100 protesters remain unaccounted for or disappeared. Dr Swaiman Singh, an American aid worker and his team were brutally attacked by police whilst they were administering medical aid to protesters and police officers.

There are credible reports that some of those detained, including elderly ex-servicemen have been humiliated and tortured. Whilst some of those detained have been released on bail hundreds remain in prison and denied access to legal representation or access to their families. Amnesty International has called for the immediate and unconditional release of those arrested solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and for the government to stop the harassment and demonisation of protesters.

5. Protesters face ridiculous charges of terrorism, sedition and anti-national conduct

Following the Tractor Rally the police and security services after indiscriminately detaining people have used draconian laws like sedition and UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) to clampdown on protesters, including those leading the protests. Use of draconian laws is an attack on their fundamental right to protest as well as their constitutional right to object to the farm laws.

For simply disagreeing with a government policy, protesters and their families have been labelled terrorists or anti-national. FIRs have been registered against the farmer leadership and people associated with the farmers protest that has complicated an already very complex and delicate process. This has made it virtually impossible to continue a dialogue with the Indian Government.

At least eight leading journalists and opposition politicians have been charged with sedition after reporting on the farmers protests. They have been charged with misreporting, spreading disharmony and inciting riots via their tweets on 26 January.

Amnesty International has said “We have seen an alarming escalation in the Indian authorities’ targeting of anyone who dares to criticise or protest the government’s repressive laws and policies. The crackdown on those protesting the Citizenship Amendment Act still hasn’t ended, while new efforts to quell the anti-farm legislation protests have taken shape. The crushing of dissent leaves little space for people to peacefully exercise their human rights including the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly in the country”.

6. State sponsored goons and badgeless police officers instigate attacks on protester camps

Soon after the Tractor Rally a mob of hundreds of angry right-wing Hindutva men in plainclothes were escorted by the police into the protest sites who attacked the farmer's camp at the Singhu border where many of those from Punjab have gathered. They attacked with petrol bombs, rocks and battens whilst police and paramilitary forces stood by and watched. Tents occupied by women were targeted for destruction and farmers attacked. Many of the farmers showed restraint in the face of these provocations.



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It has been reported BJP supporters posing as locals were identified in the mobs attacking the farmers. Eventually, the farmers resorted to self-defence. One of those who came to the defence of women in the tent they occupied was that of 22-year-old Ranjit Singh. As he was walking away from the police and mob he was dragged back and violently attacked by dozens of police officers and the mob. His face being crushed under a police officer's boot has become the image of the attack on the farmers protest site.

Videos and the image of the police officer crushing his face and being dragged by police and then police personnel thrashing him with lathis went viral. In one video, he can be seen lying on the ground, his clothes being ripped off and police personnel raining lathis on him with a couple of men in civil clothes also hitting him.

It has been reported the Delhi Police arrested 44 people in connection with the violence, but all those arrested were farmer protestors despite them acting in self-defence. The forcible attempts to remove the protesters from the protest sites is illegal, unconstitutional and arbitrary.

7. Food, electricity and fresh water supplies cut at protest sites

The protest sites resemble a war zone as the police have now erected metal and wire barricading, as well as concrete and stone boulders. The protest sites are now surrounded by barbed wire, barricades, spikes, and scores of police and paramilitary officers. Ambulances and vehicles are being restricted access to the sites. More than 2,000 iron nails have been strewn on roads leading to the sites.

Electricity and water supplies have been cut off to protest sites despite many protesters being elderly and vulnerable. The police have blocked access to portable toilets constructed by the farmers and will not allow street cleaners to clear the growing mounds of garbage, leading to concerns about the spread of infectious diseases.

8. Internet restrictions and social media blackout

Rather than investigating reports of violence against protesters and bringing suspected perpetrators to justice, the authorities have resorted to hindering access to protest sites, shutting down the Internet, censoring social media and using draconian laws against protesters who have been peacefully voicing their opposition to the new laws for several months now.

The Indian authorities cut internet access at the three protest sites and many adjoining districts in order to create a social media blackout and stop communications between the protesters and the outside world.

On 1 February, hundreds of Indian Twitter accounts including those belonging to news websites, activists and actors were suspended for more than 12 hours after the government said users were posting content inciting violence due to their use of the hashtag #FarmersProtests. Twitter reversed its decision by the evening.

However, two days later, on 3 February, the Indian government served a notice on Twitter to comply with an order to remove content and accounts related to hashtags linked to the farmers' protest. The same day, many news media organisations reported that journalists' access to the protest sites were being hindered by the police.



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9. Indian government crackdown on journalists reporting on the farmers protest

In a national crisis such as the farmers protest, accurate and fact-based reporting is an essential pillar of any democracy. However, what is clear is the level of control and influence the Indian government has over the media, which has been highlighted in the biased and divisive coverage by state-owned or state-controlled media and news outlets.

They have not only created much false propaganda against farmers they have tried every tactic in the book to defame the protests by calling them a small minority, extremists, separatists and even terrorists. They have tried to use religion and class to cause division and spread hatred, which in a country like India is highly dangerous and irresponsible. A prominent Indian celebrity called for the Genocide of Sikhs like in 1984 and this was repeated by an Indian organisation based in the UK that is being investigated by the police as a hate crime.

What is worse is how the Indian Government has crackdown on journalists who have reported the truth on police brutality. Publications like the Wire, Vice and Caravan have been harassed and their reporters threatened and arrested.

Mandeep Punia, a freelance journalist for *The Caravan*, was arrested on the evening of 30 January, shortly after *The Caravan* published a story in which he reported that the ruling BJP had sent activists to attack the protesting farmers. Initially accused of obstructing the police, and then of violence, Mandeep Punia was detained for an initial period of 14 days without being allowed to see a lawyer. He was beaten and threatened in police custody. The beatings only stopped once the police were informed a video of his arrest had gone viral. He was later granted bail.

Caravan Magazine is one of India's news platforms that has covered the farmer's protest. Ten sedition cases have been brought against three of its senior-most editorial staff (the publisher, editor, and executive editor) in five states for a story and tweets relating to the shooting of a farmer while he was on his tractor. In just a matter of a few weeks, the total number of journalists arrested in 2021, is the highest in 30 years in India.

10. Celebrities, climate change activists and female activists and politicians targeted

Popstar Rihanna sent out a simple tweet asking why 'we were not discussing the farmer's agitation in India?' Whilst many around the world thanked her for raising a debate the Indian propaganda machine began an immediate and unwarranted backlash. This began with none other than Amit Shah, the Home Affairs Minister and former President of the BJP who gave a totally disproportionate response.

Climate campaigner Greta Thunberg also tweeted in support of the farmers and faced ridiculous conspiracy allegations and vile abuse. Meena Harris the niece of US Vice President Kamala Harris joined a worldwide trend of female personalities and was not spared. Amanda Cera, Susan Sarandon, Lilly Singh and other environmentalists came out in solidarity with the farmers.

Whilst BJP activists in India burned large photographs of some of these innocent female celebrities and activists the extremely negative reaction has revealed the underbelly of the right-wing BJP ideology is also alive and being promoted in the UK, US and Canada. Female personalities and politicians in these countries who have come out in support of the farmers protest have been targeted with unacceptable threats of rape, racism and misogyny.



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The establishment and political parties in the UK have become far more conscious of this Indian right-wing threat in the last few weeks as those instigating these vile campaigns have been found to be often in prominent community or political positions.

Interestingly John Cusack was the first celebrity who tweeted in early December in support of the farmers but faced no backlash or reaction. Similarly, other male celebrities and sports personalities who have come out in support of the farmers have not been targeted in the same way revealing clear sexism.

In India Nodeep Kaur, a 25-year old labour rights activist was arrested on 12 January 2021, tortured and sexually abused while in custody. Disha Ravi a 22-year old climate activist from Bengaluru was also arrested. Following an international outcry both women have now been released on bail.

This farmers debate is taking place on International Women's Day and UK MPs should use the debate to send a clear message that there should be zero tolerance for the disgraceful and deplorable targeting of women in India and abroad for raising their voices in support of farmers.

Questions to ask the Foreign Minister

It has been 12 weeks since the Foreign Secretary met his counterpart in India. What actions has the UK Government taken in the last 12 weeks directly with India and on the international stage as the Chair of the UN Security Council in February 2021 and at UN Human Rights Council in the 46th Regular Session in Geneva to raise concerns around:

- a) the right of farmers to peacefully protest and not be subjected to violence
- b) the indiscriminate detention, disappearance and torture of protesters
- c) the immediate and unconditional release of those arrested solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly
- d) investigating the reports of violence against protesters and bringing suspected perpetrators to justice
- e) the reinstatement of electricity, water supply and access to portable toilets at the three protest sites
- f) the lifting of internet restrictions and banning of social media accounts for those at the protest sites
- g) freedom for the press to report without bias regarding the farmers protest and police brutality
- h) the right of activists in India and abroad to show solidarity with the farmers without being unfairly targeted, abused and attacked

