



**ARTICLE 19**

## **PRESS RELEASE**

For Immediate Release – 29 October 2007

### **ARTICLE 19 urges UN Committee to address free speech concerns in the United Kingdom**

**Today, the UN Human Rights Committee begins its audit of the United Kingdom's compliance with its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). ARTICLE 19 has submitted a Report calling on the Committee to question the British Government on a range of issues, including its plans to reduce use of the Freedom of Information Act, the ban on unauthorised demonstrations near Parliament Square and the high cost of defending libel suits in the UK.**

While the ARTICLE 19 Report finds that respect for freedom of expression in Britain is generally good, it points to an erosion of the right to protest as well as a failure to address a number of long-standing issues. The United Kingdom is yet to act on problems identified by the UN several years ago in the UK's Freedom of Information Act and Official Secrets Act. Instead, steps are being considered to curtail access to information.

The report warns that the vaguely defined offence of 'encouragement of terrorism' enacted after the 2005 terrorist attacks discourages the peaceful expression of extreme views, making it more difficult to confront and moderate them. The terrorist threat has provoked excessive responses, such as a six year prison sentence for protestors who chanted fundamentalist slogans and a ban on demonstrations outside Parliament without prior leave from the police.

Another problem identified by ARTICLE 19 is the high cost of defending, or even settling, libel suits in the UK. Contingent fee arrangements have made it easy to sue the media, aggravating existing procedural disadvantages which the defendant faces, and discouraging critical reporting.

#### **NOTES TO EDITORS**

- The UN Human Rights Committee will be meeting on 29 October to draw up a list of 'issues of concern' on Britain's implementation of the main UN human rights treaty, the ICCPR, and ARTICLE 19's report supplements the official UK government report. The Committee will be meeting in July 2008 for a question and answer session with British officials, at which time we will supply additional information.
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- The Report can be downloaded at <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/uk-unhrc-submission.pdf>. The UK government report is available at <http://daccess-ods.un.org/access.nsf/Get?Open&DS=CCPR/C/GBR/6&Lang=E>.
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees freedom of expression.