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PRESS RELEASE

United Kingdom: United Kingdom to Decriminalise Defamation

On Friday, 10 July 2009, the government of the United Kingdom formally committed to decriminalising defamation by doing away with the common law offences of sedition, seditious libel and defamatory libel.

The proposed amendment to the Coroners and Justice Bill was originally put forward in the House of Commons by Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament, Dr Evan Harris, after discussions with ARTICLE 19 (of which he is a board member). Lord Lester of Herne Hill also tabled a debate in the House of Lords last Thursday.

ARTICLE 19 has been campaigning for the decriminalisation of defamation, both in the UK and globally, for many years. Of the 168 countries surveyed by ARTICLE 19, 158 have criminal defamation laws and 113 countries have laws offering special protection to the most powerful and privileged figures in public life. These laws shield public figures from criticism, public scrutiny and investigation by virtue of the power they hold, thereby eating at the very heart of global efforts to promote good governance and combat corruption.

ARTICLE 19 warmly welcomes this initiative to abolish criminal defamation in the UK, which will make Britain the first Western European country to take this step. Even where criminal defamation laws have fallen into disuse, as was largely the case in the UK, the existence of these laws on the statute books provides more repressive governments around the world with the excuse they need not only to refuse to repeal of defamation laws but also to make active use of such laws to imprison journalists, writers and others.

The UK will now join other countries which have done away with criminal defamation, including Bosnia & Herzegovina, Estonia, Georgia and Ukraine in Europe, and Ghana, Sri Lanka, the United States, New Zealand and Mexico globally.

“This measure will send a very strong and clear signal globally that democracies do not have criminal defamation laws,” says Dr Agnès Callamard, Executive Director, ARTICLE 19. *“No longer will repressive countries be able to justify their criminal defamation laws on the basis that such laws exist in established democracies such as the UK.”*

“Defamation, both civil and criminal, is one of the greatest threats to freedom of expression in the world today. It is a global problem that requires global action,” continues Callamard.

Dr Harris comments, *“The acceptance by the Government that our retention of these repressive laws causes much more harm than good is welcome. The UK must set an example to the world in getting rid of anti-free speech offenses.”*

ARTICLE 19 urges other countries to follow suit and do away with criminal defamation.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- ARTICLE 19 has conducted extensive research into criminal and civil defamation worldwide and has published our findings in a series of online maps, which are located at: <http://www.article19.org/advocacy/defamationmap/map/>.
- 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 free speech.