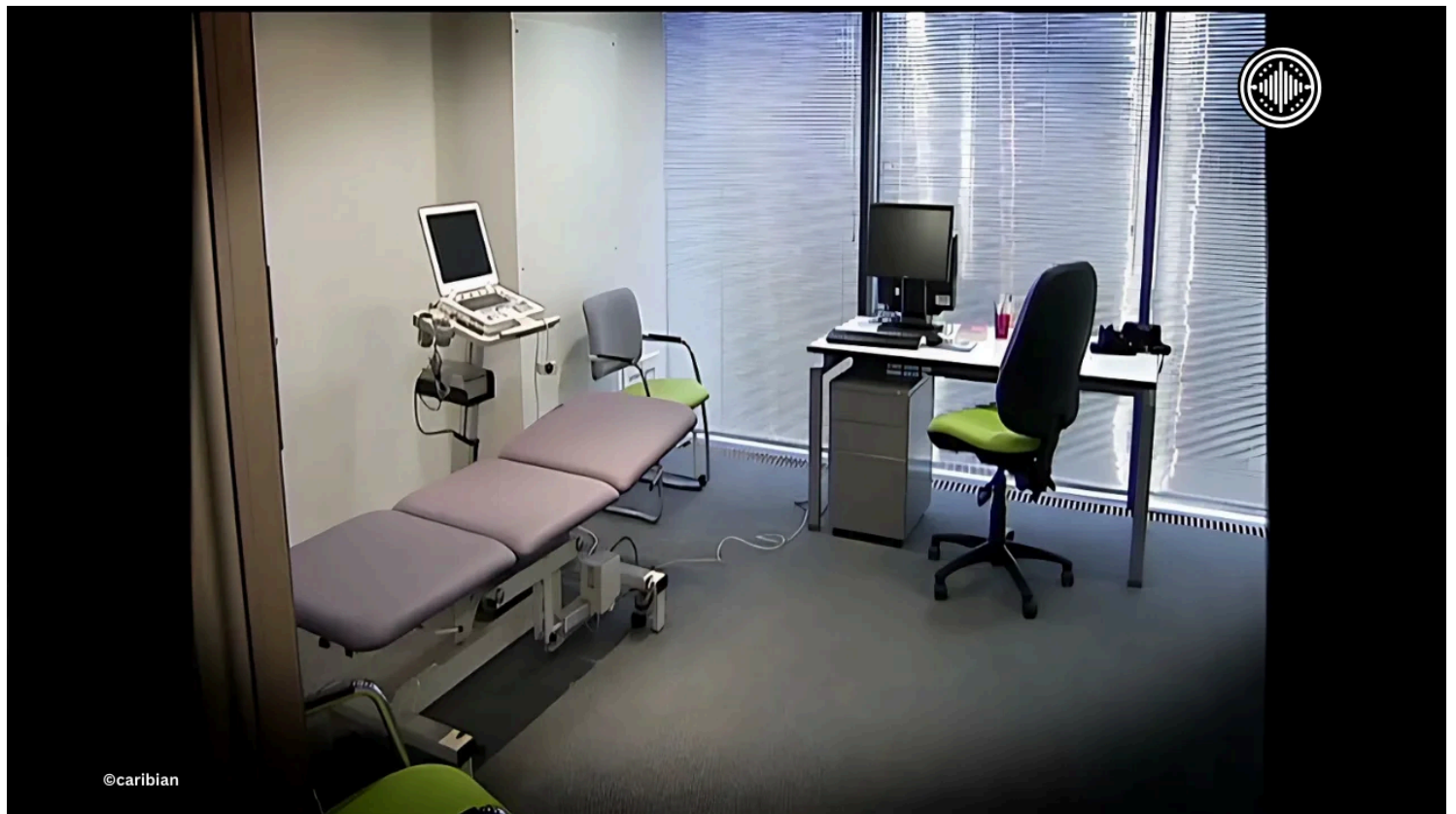


UK Faces US Criticism Over Abortion Prayer Rules

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The United States State Department has criticised buffer zones around UK abortion clinics, calling them “persecution” and “egregious” violations of fundamental freedoms, including the rights to free speech and religious practice.

The warning follows intervention from US Vice-President JD Vance in February, who claimed that individuals in Scotland had received official letters cautioning them about

praying at home within proximity to abortion facilities.

Gillian Mackay, the Scottish Parliament member responsible for the legislation, dismissed the claims as “misinformation,” noting that letters sent to residents did not explicitly prohibit prayer. However, she acknowledged that, depending on circumstances, praying by a window could fall foul of the law if it was visible to passersby.

The US State Department has specifically cited cases in which members of the public faced legal action for allegedly breaching the rules in abortion clinic buffer zones. One such case involved Livia Tossici-Bolt, a retired biomedical scientist, who received a two-year conditional discharge and was ordered to pay £20,000 in costs after holding a sign stating “Here to talk if you want to” near an abortion facility in Bournemouth.

Speaking to The Telegraph, the State Department emphasised that the UK’s enforcement of buffer zones infringes on rights to silent prayer and free expression. “The United Kingdom’s treatment of silent prayer represents not only a significant violation of fundamental freedoms, but also a concerning divergence from the shared values that should underpin US-UK relations,” a spokesperson said. “It is common sense that standing silently and offering consensual conversation does not constitute harm.”

Legal advocacy group ADF International welcomed the statement, describing the prosecutions as a departure from Britain’s long-standing traditions of liberty. Lorcan Price, legal counsel for the organisation, said: “Freedom of speech and freedom of religion are cornerstones of any free society. The US State Department is right to call out this injustice. It is time for the UK government to restore fundamental freedoms and repeal buffer zone legislation.”

The issue has sparked wider debate over the balance between protecting access to abortion services and preserving civil liberties. Supporters of buffer zones argue that they prevent harassment and intimidation outside clinics, while critics maintain that the laws disproportionately restrict lawful, peaceful expressions of opinion and religious practice.

Several legal experts have highlighted the ambiguity surrounding the legislation. While the law does not explicitly forbid prayer, any activity that could be perceived by passersby as a protest or interference with clinic operations could potentially lead to prosecution. This uncertainty has drawn criticism from international human rights observers, who argue that such restrictions risk undermining freedoms traditionally protected in the UK.

In response, advocates of free speech are calling on the UK government to revisit the legislation, asserting that buffer zones should not extend to actions that are entirely peaceful and non-disruptive. They maintain that the public should be able to express personal beliefs, including silent prayer, without fear of legal reprisal.

The debate over abortion buffer zones continues to attract international attention. The US State Department has indicated it will continue monitoring developments across the UK and Europe, particularly cases that appear to restrict freedom of expression or religious liberty.

As the discussion unfolds, legal experts and advocacy groups urge clarity in the law to ensure that both the safety of clinic visitors and the rights of individuals to lawful expression are properly balanced.