

UN Criticises UK Over Palestine Action Ban

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The United Nations' top human rights official has raised serious concerns over the UK government's decision to ban the activist group Palestine Action, calling it a misuse of anti-terrorism legislation.

Volker Turk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, has urged ministers to reverse the designation, warning that the ban is both “disproportionate and unnecessary”. His comments follow the proscription of Palestine Action earlier this month under the UK's Terrorism Act 2000.

The government's decision came after activists linked to the group claimed responsibility for spraying red paint on two military aircraft, reportedly causing £7 million in damage. The ban, which is now being legally contested in the High Court, makes it a criminal offence to belong to, support, or promote the organisation. Individuals found guilty under the law could face up to 14 years in prison.

According to government figures, more than 170 arrests have been made under the Terrorism Act since the group was proscribed.

Mr Turk, who has served as the UN human rights chief since 2022, expressed alarm at the implications of the ban. He stated that it appeared to target not only those involved in the specific incident but also wider supporters of the group who had exercised their democratic rights.

“The ban limits the rights of many people involved with and supportive of Palestine Action who have not themselves engaged in any underlying criminal activity,” Turk said. “Rather, they have exercised their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association.”

The United Nations has requested that the UK government reconsider its stance, especially given the ongoing legal challenge, which is expected to conclude later this month. At the time of writing, the Home Office has not responded to requests for comment.

Palestine Action describes itself as a direct action network targeting companies that it claims are complicit in the arms trade with Israel. Its tactics have included occupying buildings, damaging property, and conducting sit-ins at sites linked to defence firms.

The UK government's move to outlaw the group is one of the most high-profile uses of the Terrorism Act in recent years against a domestic campaign organisation. Ministers have argued that the group's actions cross a legal line and pose risks to public safety and national security.

Human rights observers and legal experts have warned that expanding the definition of terrorism to include political protest could have a chilling effect on civil liberties. The UN's intervention places additional pressure on the UK to justify its decision and demonstrate that the ban meets international standards for freedom of expression and lawful protest.

A High Court ruling on the legality of the proscription is expected before the end of August.

