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FREE SPEECH UNION

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Sir Stephen House
Acting Commissioner
The Metropolitan Police
Victoria Embankment
London SW1A 2JL

30th June 2022

Via Email: Stephen.house@met.police.uk

Dear Sir Stephen,

I am writing to you in my capacity as General Secretary of the Free Speech Union on behalf of our member, Ms Hatun Tash. We are a non-partisan, mass membership public interest body that stands up for the speech rights of its members and campaigns for free speech more widely.

The events of Sunday 26th June 2022

Ms Tash, an evangelical Christian preacher, attended Speakers' Corner on Sunday 26th June as she often does. Shortly afterwards, a man robbed her and was [caught on film](#) doing so.

A short time after that police officers arrived and arrested Ms Tash, even though she was the victim of the robbery. We understand that Ms Tash was initially arrested on suspicion of having committed an offence of Criminal Damage. However, in the police car on the way to the station she was further arrested for an offence contrary to section 4A of the Public Order Act 1986 which was racially and/or religiously aggravated. At 4am, she believes that she was arrested again for an offence contrary to section 18 of the Public Order Act which was racially and/or religiously aggravated. By way of explanation, she was told that someone had complained that the T-shirt she was wearing – which depicted one of the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed – was offensive.

A large number of police officers were involved, and she was forcibly removed from the scene with her arms held behind her back, while men pursued her, cheering and shouting "Allahu Akbar". During the course of removing her from the scene, [another attempt](#) was made to assault her. I understand that her belongings were left unattended at Speakers' Corner where they could have been stolen. Usually, the police when they arrest someone will take the suspect's belongings with them.

Ms Tash was taken to Charing Cross police station, where, after her glasses were removed, she was strip-searched, interviewed (during which she was asked about her T-shirt) and kept in a cell overnight, before being released the next morning without charge.

Police treatment of Ms Tash

The arrest and subsequent treatment of Ms Tash – the day before the 150th anniversary of Speakers' Corner – is wholly unacceptable and is the latest in a number of occasions when the Police have failed to uphold her rights.

As with the last time Ms Tash was arrested, we believe her actions were well within the scope of speech protected by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

We are writing on her behalf to ask you to provide a justification for why she was arrested and, if you cannot provide one, to apologise. We would also like to know whether the officers who arrested her were aware of the long-running targeting of her by demonstrators and the pattern of violence inflicted on her?

I understand that the officers concerned on Sunday were not members of the Royal Parks Operational Command Unit and were not trained in policing Speakers' Corner. Indeed, I suspect that had that unit been policing Speakers' Corner on that day, Ms Tash would not have been arrested.

In our previous correspondence with the Metropolitan Police (attached), the arrest of Ms Tash last year was justified by an Inspector of the Royal Parks Operational Command Unit on the basis that: "She is a controversial and forceful speaker whom Muslim attendees often find offensive."

As we said in response to that letter (attached), being offensive is not an offence and is not a justification for arresting someone.

The Inspector's letter of 25th June 2021 went on to suggest that removing Ms Tash on that occasion was the preferable course of action because "asking a group of 40 volatile persons to leave would have been impossible".

I fail to understand how it can be right that one person not breaking the law is of more concern to the Police than a large crowd making threats against a woman and, in this recent case, of more concern than the fact that the woman had just been the victim of a robbery? The Police's duty to protect Ms Tash's rights and safety should have been paramount, especially following the knife attack she suffered on 25th July 2021, for which no arrest has been made.

We are particularly concerned about the fact that she was strip-searched. On what basis was this done? What reason did your officers have to believe that Ms Tash was in possession of anything that warranted a strip search?

Further questions for the police

Has any investigation been undertaken into the robbery that Ms Tash suffered in the minutes before she was arrested?

Has any investigation been undertaken to identify the individual who attempted to assault her while she was being arrested?

The person who stabbed her last year has still not been arrested or charged. What is the status of this investigation?

Public confidence

Footage of Ms Tash surrounded by a large, hostile group of (mainly) men and then being forcibly removed by your officers will undermine the public's confidence in the Metropolitan Police's willingness to uphold the right to free speech, particularly as it took place on the eve of the 150th anniversary of Speakers' Corner. This will be significantly compounded by the fact that she was strip-searched, which, given the flimsy pretext for the arrest and the fact she was released without charge, seems indicative of a desire to punish Ms Tash and deter her from exercising her lawful right to free speech in future, rather than a reasonable or proportionate response to a complaint about a T-shirt.

Given the seriousness of this matter, we would very much appreciate a prompt response.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Toby Young'.

Toby Young
General Secretary
The Free Speech Union
toby@freespeechunion.org

Cc: The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP, Home Secretary
The Rt Hon Kit Malthouse MP, Minister of State for Crime and Policing