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PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF ALL HUMAN RIGHTS, CIVIL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT

**Written statement^{*} submitted by Cairo Institute For Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 February 2009]

^{*} This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Repression of Minorities in the Arab Region: An Ongoing Dilemma

The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) would like to express its concern over the continuing deterioration of the human rights situation of ethnic and religious minorities in the Arab region.

1. One of the chronic problems of the human rights situation in the Arab region can largely be attributed to a refusal among Arab regimes to recognize the religious and sectarian plurality within their societies. Arab regimes have been and are still unwilling to take progressive steps towards the realization of a complete integration of the different cultural, ethnic and religious minorities in their countries. Consequently, civil wars and insurgents that claimed the lives of thousands of civilians were inevitable in Iraq, Sudan and Yemen. Other ethnic and religious minorities in Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria are still constantly oppressed by their states while being deprived of their basic citizenship rights and continue to be subject to various ethnic and religion-based discriminations. The Moroccan initiative to create a special television channel devoted to Amazigh language and culture remains an isolated move and has not been recreated elsewhere.
2. Failure to protect or deliberate perpetration of human rights violations against minorities is increasing throughout the Arab region. Impunity for violations and the lack of international accountability for most of these vulnerable groups ensure that such violations will continue. Sectarian conflicts are increasing due, in part, to the role played by regional political powers which often fuel ethno-religious tensions among different groups in order to achieve their political goals. For example, the role played by Iran in Iraq, Lebanon and very recently in Bahrain.¹

CIHRS would like to direct the attention of the Human Rights Council to the role that discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities has played in the creation of armed conflict in the Arab region.

1. In Darfur, the Sudanese government continues to fail to provide protection for Darfurian civilians of the *Fur*, *Massalit* and *Zaghawa* ethnic minorities. These remain victims of widespread human rights violations by both the government and government-backed-militia armed forces. Throughout 2008, hundreds have been killed and thousands displaced, their possessions plundered and their homes usurped, burnt or demolished due to violations committed by all parties to the conflict. In October, 2008, Al-Muhajiriyya village came under attack by the government and allied militias during which 48 civilians were killed.² The issuance of a warrant of arrest by the International Criminal Court Prosecutor against President *Omar Bashir* in July, 2008 didn't stop the government from continuing to aid and/or carry out violent operations and reprisals against Darfurian minorities. From October 5-17, 2008 government forces and its supporting militias raided

¹ A number of Iranian officials have recently claimed Bahrain to be an integral part of the Islamic Republic and questioned its Arabic identity.

² UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Sudan, Sima Samar*, March 3, 2008, (A/HRC/7/22).

more than 12 villages in Southern Darfur. Over 40 civilians were killed and thousands were forced to flee their villages when their houses were burnt down and their livestock poached.³ In addition, the "Kalma" camp for Internally Displaced Persons in Southern Darfur, composed mostly of ethnic minorities, witnessed a brutal attack on August 25, 2008 that resulted in the death of 39 persons and injured 51, most of whom were women and children.⁴

2. The Sa'dah conflict in Yemen between the government and the *Al-Huthis*, mainly from the *Zaydiyyah* minority Shiite community, in the northern province of Sa'dah, has been the scene of large-scale violations of human rights and breaches of international humanitarian law during the past year. Since the start of the conflict four years ago, approximately 2000 people were arbitrarily arrested and detained by the government for supporting the *Al-Huthis* rebels. During last year alone, the armed conflict has been the cause for hundreds of deaths and the displacement of thousands of persons. Although the Yemeni President officially announced the end of the internal conflict in July 2008, existing religious discrimination and tension indicates a high prospect for the outbreak of renewed fighting. With the international community turning a blind eye on the conflict, there is an urgent need to send a commission of inquiry to Yemen to investigate violations committed during the conflict.
3. In Iraq, acts of violence amounting to religion-based assassinations and the rise of a religious and tribal discourse based on sectarian conflicts continue to pose grave threats to existing religious minorities. Although not directly implicated in the acts of sectarian violence, the government is held responsible for failing to abide by its responsibility to protect and to bring an end to the conflict. Religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq, particularly in conflict areas in Northern Iraq, are still prone to attacks by Shiite and Sunni Muslim groups. One month after the blast of three explosive trucks in Ozor village with the Yazidi majority in Niyouni governorate killing around 350 persons, UNAMI issued reports on the continued harassment of the Yazidi minority in the governorates of Niyouni and Sallaheddin by the Sunni majority during the last quarter of 2007. Attacks against Christian families continued in the Al-Dawra district in Baghdad, mostly inhabited by Sunnis. Militant Sunni groups compelled Christians to pay \$100 as a security fine, leading to the increase of Christian displacement. Reports by Iraqi Christians indicated that at least 44 Christians were killed during the second half of 2007 due to the continued targeting of Christians in Baghdad and Musel.

CIHRS would like to further highlight other major violation to minority rights in the Arab region.

1. In Bahrain, despite constituting a demographic majority, Shiites are denied access to senior positions in the government and government-owned institutions and are regularly marginalized in the economic, educational and political realms. The Bahraini army,

³ Human Rights Watch, *Sudan: New Darfur Attacks Show Civilians Still at Risk*, October 24, 2008.

⁴ "Protection Through Accountability" Calling on the Human Rights Council and International Community to Protect Civilians in Palestine and Darfur, Press Release, Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), September 28, 2008, available at <http://www.cihrs.org/English/NewsSystem/Articles/465>.

abundant with foreigners and nationalized citizens from various other countries, is not accessible for Shiite citizens. Shiites' actual representation in the army is 1%. The Bahraini government has a record of manipulating the existing population percentages in the country by selectively nationalizing Sunni foreigners to reshape electoral constituencies in a manner that is not reflective of the country's indigenous demographic reality. Furthermore, the government is constantly engaging in violent attacks against the Shiite population. On February 27, 2008, the riot police attacked a Shiite religious ceremony and used sound and tear gas bombs causing serious injuries. In April 2008, authorities arrested around 47 activists from various Shiite villages and later released them.⁵ Reports soon surfaced of detainees being subjected to torture and mistreatment.

2. Saudi Arabia's official policy discriminates against the Shiite sect in the country. Saudi law and social practice restricts the rights of Shiites in all areas of life, including employment, the building of mosques and the publication of religious books. Moreover, the testimonies of Shiites are not admissible in courts of law. There is a tendency to consider all those belonging to the Shiite school as "disbelievers of God." This tendency is supported by many official and non-official religious leaders as well as the religious police and religious *da'awa* (call) centers. Authorities allowed Shiite groups to organize commemorations for the occasions of their holy Days in Al-Qatif, but forbid these ceremonies in areas such as Ad-Dammam and Al-Ahsa. The government also carries out discrimination against Shiites in the educational system. Very few Shiites hold positions as professors and/or principals even in areas where the majority of the population is Shiite.⁶ Shiites are also excluded from representation in higher diplomatic, security and military posts. Throughout Saudi Arabia's history, no Shiite has ever been nominated as minister. Many Shiites in Saudi Arabia suffer from poverty and poor living standards as a consequence of the discriminatory policy adopted by the state.⁷
3. In Syria, Kurds, who constitute the largest ethnic minority in the country, continue to be the target of state suppression and discrimination. For decades, a reported 300,000 Syrian Kurds have been stripped of their citizenship, prevented from expressing their Kurdish identity and deprived of their right to use the Kurdish language in educational institutions. Without citizenship, Kurds are denied their basic rights, particularly those related to the right to property, employment, travel, registering marriage contracts and birth certificates, as well as the right to participate in elections.⁸ On February 3, 2008, the Supreme State Security Court in Damascus sentenced four Kurdish citizens to 7-10 years

⁵ *SEE AMOUNTING UNREST AND VIOLATIONS IN BAHRAIN*, PRESS RELEASE, BAHRAIN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (BCHR) APRIL 17, 2008, AVAILABLE AT [HTTP://WWW.BAHRAINRIGHTS.ORG/EN/NODE/2075](http://WWW.BAHRAINRIGHTS.ORG/EN/NODE/2075).

⁶ In Al-Ahsa province 50% of the population is Shiite. Nevertheless, Shiite professors in one of the major universities in Al Ahsa make up only 2% of its total professors. While hundreds of all-boys schools exist in Al Ahsa, only five of them are run by Shiite principals. Although the state has recently started to appoint female Shiite principals to all-girls schools, in general, Shiite teachers, even in areas majorly populated by Shiites, are not permitted to teach history or religion. See US Department of State, report on religious freedoms in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2007, at 8, available at <http://riyadh.usembassy.gov/root/pdfs/international-religious-freedom-report2.pdf>.

⁷ *Shiite in Saudi Arabia: from Marginalization to Containment*, US Cable News Network (CNN), April 7, 2007, available at http://arabic.cnn.com/2007/middle_east/3/8/shiite-saudi/.

⁸ Statement by Committees for Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria, September 18, 2008.

in prison on accusations of raising slogans in opposition of the State and affiliating with banned political associations that aim to seize, usurp and adjoin part of the Syrian territories to a foreign country.⁹ On March 20, 2008, three people were killed as security bodies randomly fired on Kurdish citizens who gathered in *Alqameshli* city to celebrate the Persian New Year.¹⁰ Such violent repressive attacks against Kurds in Syria are reflective of a persistent pattern of repression that started several decades ago.

4. In Egypt, discrimination against Christian Copts continues unabated, which is reflected in the state's refusal to adopt a unified law on places of worship concerning building, renewing or maintaining churches. Converting or re-converting to Christianity continues to be seen as an act of "apostasy."¹¹ On February 9, 2008, the Supreme Administrative Court issued a sentence for 12 citizens who had re-converted to Christianity after their conversion to Islam. The Court ordered relevant authorities to issue them new identity cards indicating their previous conversion to Islam – an act that will most likely subject them to official and unofficial discrimination.¹² Over the last few years, Baha'is have faced difficulties relating to the Egyptian government's continued refusal to recognize their religion on their identity cards and other personal documents or to even leave the religion item blank.¹³ Furthermore, Nubians¹⁴ started to be forcibly deported from their villages since the beginning of 20th Century until 1960s and have since then been denied their right to re-settle.¹⁵ Furthermore, they were also denied adequate compensation and are facing harsh living conditions, in absence of proper infrastructure, education and as they suffer from high unemployment rates.

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⁹Statement by the Kurdish Organization for the Defense of Human Rights and Public Freedoms in Syria, February 3, 2008.

¹⁰ A joint statement by the Syrian League for Defending Human Rights and the Syrian Human Rights Monitor, March 21, 2008.

¹¹ See generally *Prohibited Identities: State Interference with Religious Freedom*, Human Rights Watch and The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, November 11, 2007, at 2, available at <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/egypt1107webwcover.pdf>.

¹² Egypt: "Re-Conversion" Decision Is a Welcome Step: Government Should Protect Converts from Discrimination, Harassment, Press Release, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), February 10, 2008, available at <http://www.eipr.org/en/press/08/1002.htm>.

¹³ This is in spite of the fact that on January 29, 2008, an Administrative Court acknowledged the right of Egyptian Baha'is to acquire birth certificates and identity cards without indicating certain religions in their identity documents. To date, neither ruling has been implemented. See generally *Egypt: Court Prohibits Withholding Documents from Baha'is: Government Should Implement Discrimination Decision Without Delay*, Press Release, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), January 30, 2008, available at <http://www.eipr.org/en/press/08/3001.htm>.

¹⁴ Nubians are an ethnic indigenous minority that lives in southern Egypt.

¹⁵ See generally Ayman Zohry and Barbara Harrell-Bond, *Contemporary Egyptian Migration: An Overview of Voluntary and Forced Migration*, Working Paper C3, The American University in Cairo (AUC), December 2003, at 23-4, available at http://www.migrationdrc.org/publications/working_papers/WP-C3.pdf.