



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
3 June 2022

English only

---

## Human Rights Council

Fiftieth session

13 June–8 July 2022

Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by TOBE Foundation for Rights & Freedoms, 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.

[19 May 2022]

---

\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.



## **Women Human Rights Defenders and Journalists in the Middle East and North Africa region Face Death, Incarceration and Judicial Harassment**

The TOBE Foundation for Rights & Freedoms and the Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRD) Regional Coalition in the Middle East and North Africa (WHRD MENA Coalition) are extremely concerned about the continued targeting, incarceration and even murder of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and journalists in Yemen, the State of Palestine and the Sudan. The Human Rights Council needs to hold these states accountable, push them to punish perpetrators, including state and non-state actors in accordance with the law, and to allow WHRDs to conduct their work of defending human rights safely.

In Yemen, women and WHRDs are held captive in secret prisons in San'aa by the Houthi militant groups, where they are subjected to, according to various news outlets, abduction and various forms of torture. They tend to be held in these secret prisons for years. In a published testimony by a 55-year-old WHRD, who is a member of the General People's Congress, she describes how she was beaten on a daily basis, forced to stand on one foot and electrocuted. Moreover, she currently has problems with her vision due to her beating on a daily basis, and suffers from renal disease due to drinking polluted water in these prisons.(1)

Other detainees include students, women who do not conform to the norms and rules of Houthi Militias, Baha'i women, or those who speak up against their atrocities. Around 200 women have been held in these prison cells and these militias employ women "forces" known as "zeneebat" who beat the women and torture them in various ways, including not letting them use the toilet or not allowing them to sleep(2). According to the Rome Convention, these crimes constitute crimes of war and crimes against humanity. An independent international commission needs to be formed to investigate these crimes and hold those accountable according to international law. Moreover, recent violations include stopping the release of journalist Hala Badawy(3), who has been incarcerated in Hadramout Prison for the last 3 months, despite the court's decision to release her. The prosecution appealed the release order, a tactic used to stop the release of WHRDs. Badawy was forcibly disappeared in a prison affiliated to the military intelligence, and a smear campaign was initiated against her at the same time of her first interrogation session at the prosecution. Another court affiliated to the Houthis issued a verdict for the 5 years' imprisonment of model Intisar ElHamady(4), for "committing an indecent act and possession of drugs". Intisar stated that she was attacked verbally and physically, and was forced to sign a statement while she was blindfolded. A request was also submitted to have her undergo a virginity test, which she refused to adhere to while interrogating her. Houthi forces arrested her at a checkpoint after confiscating her phone and finding her modeling pictures on it. According to her lawyer, she is currently held at San'aa Central Prison, where guards call her a "prostitute" and "slave", due to her dark skin, as her father is Yemeni and mother is Ethiopian. The Houthi rule does not accept any criticism of the measures it implements, as journalist Nadia Mokbel(5) was released after she was incarcerated for 41 days for working in San'aa on a report about the increase of prices during the Ramadan season. The Houthi government must immediately stop the targeting of WHRDs, journalists and women and be held accountable for inciting misogynist practices against women.

In the State of Palestine, prolific Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh was murdered on 11 May 2022 while covering an Israeli army raid at the Jenin refugee camp. She was killed by being shot behind her ear despite wearing a "Press" vest and helmet. This was followed by "the Israeli prime minister, Naftali Bennett, (saying that) armed Palestinians were "likely" responsible, but Israel has since rowed back and said it was investigating" (6). While the UN Security Council has unanimously announced its condemnation of her killing and called for a thorough, transparent and impartial investigation, an international committee must be formed to conduct the investigation to ensure that justice will be implemented and Israel is held accountable. Also, the attack on her funeral procession on 13 May 2022 by Israeli officers must be investigated by the same independent committee to ensure that impunity does not take place. It should be noted that Abu Akleh was known for helping Palestinian women in the midst of raids and attacks, within the context of the occupation, to find their children, and is deeply connected to the Palestinian community. Moreover, WHRD

Shaza Odeh(7) was sentenced to one year and 4 months' imprisonment, and a \$9000 USD fine by an Israeli military tribunal on 12 May 2022, and was also given a 5 year suspended sentence on the condition that she does not provide health services(8). Odeh was incarcerated by Israeli security forces since 7 July 2021, when her house was raided in Ramallah, and the vehicle of the Health Work Committees that Odeh heads was confiscated, in addition to closing the premises of the concerned committees in Ramallah. Odeh is a nurse and WHRD who works on access to health services in various communities in the Western Bank, where her organization alone provides 12% of the health services Palestinians can reach. She faced some harassment from Israel previously due to her work, where the latest was in June 2021 when administration offices were closed for 6 months in accordance with an Israeli military order, and the Minister of Health reopened premises where provision of services continued. Odeh should be immediately released and her judicial harassment must stop, to allow her to continue working on the provision of health services to Palestinians, and in particular Palestinian women.

Meanwhile in the Sudan, WHRD Sulima Sherif was summoned by the Prosecution of Crimes against the State, which released her on her personal guarantee. Sulima works as the director of the unit to combat violence against women, affiliated to the government, after the Sudanese revolution and before the military coup led by General Abdel Fattah Burhan. Sulima was appointed in this position due to her vast experience in working on the issue of violence against women, including sexual violence and the documentation of these crimes by either state or non-state actors. The reason behind the summoning of Sulima for the first time since the coup is the speech of the UNITAMS representative Volker Perthes (9) about the Sudan and in particular, crimes of violence against women, as his speech contained information related to these crimes by state actors, especially rape crimes, which he obtained from Sulima. This information was disseminated beforehand in local and international media and via various social media platforms and is not a secret. The summoning of Sulima suggests the outrage of the coup government over the exposure of their sexual violence crimes against women, and the lack of a real willingness to investigate these crimes without bias and hold perpetrators accountable. Subsequently, the coup government is sending a clear message to all WHRDs working on the issue of violence against women by punishing them for their defense of women's rights and their right to physical and psychological integrity, and having their perpetrators held accountable. In addition, it points to the methodology employed by Burhan in hiding facts, as he threatened to expel the UNITAMS representative Volker Perthes due to his "interference" in country affairs, and "during the graduation of new iterations from the military academy and Karary University, Burhan demanded from the UNITAMS representative to stop persisting in violating the mandate of the UN mission and blatant interference in Sudanese affairs, and that this will lead to his expulsion from the country". Women and WHRDs in the Sudan face numerous and horrific violations perpetrated by Sudanese security forces, including physical and sexual violations, arrest, interrogation, force of charges and enforced disappearance, and it even caused in one case the miscarriage of a woman and breaking her leg. Sustaining Sudanese women's fundamental right to their physical integrity, having their rapists held accountable and those who violate them should be an utter priority that is sought, and the current coup government should adopt the demands of the Sudanese feminist movement, especially what is related to women's rights in both private and public spheres, not punish them for their activism in the public sphere, and support their practice of their right to freedom of thought and expression. Working on safe private and public spheres for women in the Sudan is one of the fundamental issues that the government should adopt and help WHRDs who bravely work on documentation of these crimes and combating them.

In subsequence, the Human Rights Council needs to call on the concerned states perpetrating the highlighted crimes to hold perpetrators accountable, immediately release WHRDs and form independent investigative committees to investigate these atrocious crimes.

this statement.

1. <https://samrl.org/pdf/1Women%20in%20yemen%20report.pdf>
2. ibis
3. <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/249896>
4. <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-59171926>
5. <https://almahriah.net/local/19293>
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/14/shireen-abu-akleh-un-security-council-unanimously-condemns-killing-of-journalist>
7. <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2022/05/13/israel-sentences-palestinian-nurse-and-health-activist-shatha-odeh-to-16-months-in-prison/>
8. <https://whrdmena.org/2021/08/09/freeshathaude/>
9. <https://www.france24.com/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A9/20220401-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%8A%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AB-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86>