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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

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.

[21 August 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



The Targeting and Incarceration of Women Human Rights Defenders and Human Rights Organizations in the Middle-East and North Africa region Continues

The TOBE Foundation for Rights & Freedoms and the Women Human Rights Defenders 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) & journalists in Yemen, Palestinian territories, Egypt and the Sudan.

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 6 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. 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.

In Palestinian territories, 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 \$9000USD 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. 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 West 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(8). Odeh should be immediately released to allow her to continue working on the provision of health services to Palestinians, and in particular Palestinian women.

Recently, Israeli military forces raided the office of 7 Palestinian civil society and human rights organizations in Ramallah(9) on Thursday 18 August 2022, namely the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees (UPWC), Bisan Center for Research & Development, Al-Haq, Addameer, Defense for Children, the Union of Agricultural Work Committees and the Union of Health Work Committees, 6 of which (excluding the latter) were designated as terrorist group organizations by the government of Israel in October 2021. The 7th organization that was not designated as a terrorist group, was also raided on the same day, namely the Union of Health Work Committees, which was led by WHRD Shatha Odeh before her arrest as referred to above. The raided offices were looted, equipment was confiscated, and doors were welded shut. It is important to note that these organizations provide various services to Palestinians and lead important work in the field of human rights, including defense of political prisoners, defense of women's human rights, provision of services to farmers, provision of health services, maintaining rights of children and fighting child labor, in addition to highlighting the violations committed by Israel in its occupation of Palestinian territories. This is a tactic that has always been employed by Israel against Palestinians to negate their rights, isolate them, and threaten their sovereignty. Similar to methods employed by oppressive states, carrying out these atrocious human rights violations under the guise of maintaining security, is a false premise for which governments should be held accountable by the international community.

In Egypt, Marwa Arafa(10) is arbitrarily detained since the raid on her house in the evening of 20 April 2020, where her house was raided and she was arrested after her house was searched, without the presence of a permit or authorization from the concerned body. Marwa appeared 14 days later on 4 May 2020 at the National Security Prosecution, where she was interrogated in Case no. 570 of 2020, where a warrant for her arrest was present, in addition to an investigative memo. Marwa is charged with joining a terrorist organization and knowing its objectives and committing a funding crime. Marwa helped families affected by the incarceration of their providers, and the help she presented was seasonal, consisting of sustenance supplies, study material and medication for families, as a form of humanitarian support. Marwa exceeded the legal duration of detention on remand, namely 2 years, and is kept away from her daughter who is a child who has recently turned 3 years old.

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. The reason behind the summoning of Sulima for the first time since the coup is the speech of the UNITAMS representative Volker Perthes(11) 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. Women and WHRDs in the Sudan face numerous and horrific violations perpetrated by Sudanese security forces, including physical and sexual violations, arrest, interrogation, forge 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 should be an utter priority that is sought, and the current coup government should adopt the demands of the Sudanese feminist movement, not punish them for their activism in the public sphere, and support their practice of their right to freedom of thought and expression.

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.

The Women Human Rights Defenders Regional Coalition in the Middle East and North Africa (WHRD MENA Coalition), NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.

<https://samrl.org/pdf/1Women%20in%20yemen%20report.pdf>

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