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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

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.

[5 February 2023]

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



Imprisonment, Rape and Raid Of Premises Of Women Human Rights Defenders and Human Rights Organizations In The Middle East and North Africa Continues

The TOBE Foundation for Rights & Freedoms, Sudanese Women Rights Action and the Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRD) Regional Coalition in MENA are extremely concerned about the continued targeting, imprisonment, rape, murder and decades-long verdicts of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and journalists in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan and Yemen.

In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Israeli military forces raided the office of 7 Palestinian civil society and human rights organizations in Ramallah 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. 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. Another development in Northern Ramallah is the attack deployed by Israeli forces on 29 women imprisoned in Israeli prisons, where they were beaten, had teargas and pepper spray fired at them and some of them were isolated. This attack followed the confiscation of electrical devices from the women prisoners. Consequently, 120 prisoners in Al-Naqab Prison declared their hunger-strike, to protest the aforementioned attacks. These crimes must be investigated immediately and accountability must be conducted. It is predicted that the violence will escalate in the current struggle of Al-Aseera Movement against Israeli forces. Furthermore, 2 sisters, namely Wissam and Fatma Al Taweel, were forced to return to their home in Gaza, which they had escaped from more than once, due to their abusive father starving them, threatening to murder them in live posts on Facebook, urging them to commit suicide and placing a gas tank in their room. It is important to mention that the police did not provide protection for them, and the governmental safehouse they were residing in expelled them on 13 November 2022 from the safehouse, despite the regulations that prohibit this action, and both governmental and non-governmental entities aided in the coercive return of Al Taweel sisters to the abusive home and incited public opinion against them. It is worth noting that such safehouses are funded by international rights organizations that need to be held accountable for playing a complicit role by funding entities that do not provide safety for domestic violence victims and survivors.

In a joint statement published on 13 January 2023, horrific crimes against Sudanese protesters, WHRDs, women and children were documented, a month after a political framework for the transition of power to civilian actors was signed, which was received positively by several members of the international community. Due to the continuation of protests against the aforementioned political framework, several crimes were committed, including the rape of a 15-year old girl, killing of women in Darfur, raid of a women's group, and shooting a woman protester with a gas canister after which she lost her eye: "Jameela Adam, 30 years old, mother of 3 children was killed on 31 December 2022 while fetching wood in South Darfur. On 6 January 2023, members of the former regime kidnapped and raped a 15 year old girl, who is the daughter of O.A., one of the members of the dismantling committee of the Albashir regime. Hundreds of women have been displaced in Darfur since 15 December 2022. Dozens were injured and at least one woman was killed during militia

attacks in Central Darfur. In Khartoum, one woman protester lost her eye during protests on 13 December 2022, in Omdurman. She was shot by a gas canister shotgun in her eye when the security forces violently cracked down on the protests. On 14 December 2022, the office of Alharisat, one of the prominent women groups, was raided by security forces, and the staff were threatened.” UN bodies must ensure that these crimes are investigated, and that the safety of women and protesters is guaranteed.

As for Saudi Arabia, two WHRDs had decades-long imprisonment sentences issued against them, including WHRD Salma Al-Shehab and WHRD Nourah Al Qahtani, where the former was sentenced to 34 years imprisonment, followed by a 34 year travel ban, and the latter had the appeals court increase her sentence from 13 to 45 years imprisonment. Al-Shehab received this brutal sentence for her online activism on twitter where she “(demonstrated) her belief in the justice of the Palestinian cause and to defend prisoners of conscience.” Meanwhile, Al Qahtani received the aforementioned sentence “after the lower court had convicted her of Twitter-based crimes including ‘using the Internet to tear the [country’s] social fabric’ and ‘violating the public order by using social media’ under the Counter-Terrorism Law and Anti-Cyber Crime Law”. A similar sentence is expected against WHRD Dr. Lina Al Sharif, who expressed her opinion online on “women’s rights, freedom of belief and freedom of expression, in addition to calling for the release of all prisoners of opinion.” It is worth noting that she was forcibly disappeared for 2 months after her home was raided. Prevention of the issuance of this horrid sentence must be prioritized by all international actors.

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. 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. 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, who has been incarcerated in Hadramout Prison for the last year, 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, 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 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. There are also reports of Houthi-mandated dress codes for women in the streets, to dress in black, prohibiting colored clothes.

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.

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