

21 February 2020

HRC43: Jointly reiterate calls on Saudi Arabia to release human rights defenders and address key benchmarks for human rights reform

Dear Minister,

We are writing to urge that your government support joint action at the upcoming United Nations Human Rights Council session, and throughout the year, to hold Saudi Arabia to its international human rights obligations.

We appreciate your commitment to Saudi women's rights defenders and to the improvement of the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia. Your government's support to the joint statements delivered by Iceland and Australia at the United Nations Human Rights Council (the Council) in 2019 has contributed to direct impact on the ground. At least seven women human rights defenders have been provisionally released and the Saudi government has taken initial steps towards dismantling the male guardianship system.¹

While acknowledging these positive steps, made possible through sustained international public scrutiny, which came to buttress the decades-long work and sacrifices of Saudi civil society, our organisations remain gravely concerned at the continuing human rights violations in the Kingdom. The joint statements, delivered by Iceland at the 40th session and by Australia at the 42nd session, identified a series of benchmarks the Saudi government should fulfil to address the grave human rights concerns raised at the Council, and it is important that Council scrutiny be maintained until these benchmarks are met. In particular:

- During the 40th session, your government [called](#) on the Saudi government to **release all individuals detained for exercising their fundamental freedoms** including ten women's rights activists. Several of them are still in prison and at least 14 individuals were arrested in April 2019, including family members and supporters of the women's rights movement. Mass arrests in April and November targeted over 20 Saudi intellectuals and writers. The women's rights defenders who were provisionally released are still facing charges based solely on their activism.
- Through the joint statements, your government [expressed concern at the persecution, harassment and intimidation of activists, journalists, dissidents and their family members and called for an end to impunity for torture and extrajudicial killings](#). Our organisations have documented torture, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and unfair trials of individuals targeted for exercising their fundamental freedoms. Yet, the Saudi government has yet to take any measures to hold those responsible accountable and provide victims with effective remedy. Family members of activists are still facing travel bans and intimidation.
- Your government has called on the Saudi government to [establish truth and accountability for the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi](#) and to fully cooperate with relevant mandate

¹ The amendments published on August 2nd 2019 allow women to obtain passports and travel abroad without permission of their male guardians, grant women the right to register marriages, divorces, births and deaths, to obtain family records and benefit from new protections against employment discrimination. However, Saudi women still must obtain a male guardian's approval to get married or be released from prison or shelters where they have sought protection from domestic abuse or violence. See more details: [Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#).

holders. The trial was concluded in December 2019. The Special Rapporteur [concluded](#) that *“those who ordered the executions not only walk free but have barely been touched by the investigation and the trial...at no point did the trial consider the responsibilities of the State”*. The Saudi government refused to cooperate with her [inquiry](#).

- During the 42nd session, your government [called](#) on Saudi Arabia to fully cooperate with the Council, including by **accepting visits by relevant Special Procedures**. The Saudi government is [yet](#) to accept any country visit requests since 2017. Your government also encouraged the Saudi government to **ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and appealed to it to end its use of the death penalty**. The Saudi government has not yet taken any measures to implement these calls.
- During the 40th session, your government [called](#) on the Saudi government to take meaningful steps to **ensure that all members of the public, including human rights defenders and journalists, can freely and fully exercise their rights to freedoms of expression, opinion and association, including online, without fear of reprisals**. Yet numerous cases of reprisals were documented in the Secretary-General’s [annual report on reprisals](#), and arrests of dissidents have [continued](#).

Human rights defenders and civil society groups [can and should play a vital role](#) in the process of reform which the Kingdom is pursuing. **The immediate and unconditional release of the women’s rights activists and human rights defenders would be a litmus test of the Saudi government’s political will to improve the human rights situation on the ground and to engage constructively with the Council.**

Following her [inquiry](#) into the extrajudicial killing of Khashoggi, the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions called on the Saudi government to demonstrate non-repetition by releasing all individuals imprisoned for peacefully expressing their views and to conduct an overhaul reform of the institutions that made his execution possible.

The Saudi government does respond to international pressure, but for the impact to continue and not backslide, it must be maintained. We recall that the situation in Saudi Arabia [meets the objective criteria](#) which your government has committed to applying in deciding whether a situation merits the Council’s attention. **Our organisations urge you to ensure sustained scrutiny by the Council at its 43rd session by jointly reiterating calls on the Saudi government to implement the above-mentioned benchmarks, and by supporting the establishment of a monitoring and reporting mechanism over the situation. We urge you to underline in your statements that should these benchmarks not be met, more formal Council action will follow.**

Please accept the assurances of our highest consideration,

1. International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
2. Human Rights Watch
3. Amnesty International
4. ALQST
5. Gulf Center for Human Rights
6. Equality Now
7. CIVICUS

Public Letter to Foreign Ministers

8. Women's March Global
9. Access Now
10. Urgent Action Fund
11. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
12. Humanists International
13. Reprieve
14. English PEN
15. MENA Rights Group
16. Bahrain Institute for Rights & Democracy (BIRD)
17. Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain
18. European Center for Democracy and Human Rights
19. European Saudi Organization for Human Rights
20. Louder-Lebanon
21. The Lebanese Council to Resist Violence Against Woman
22. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
23. Vigilance for Democracy and the Civic State
24. Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada
25. DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project)
26. Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
27. Asian Legal Resource Center (ALRC)