

## UN rights wing ‘appalled’ at mass execution in Iraq

15 December 2017 – Expressing deep shock at a mass execution of 38 men at a prison in the Iraqi city of Nassiriya, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)) has called on the country to establish an immediate moratorium and carry out an urgent and comprehensive review of its criminal justice system.

“The mass execution [...] once again raises [huge concerns about the use of the death penalty in the country](#),” Liz Throssell, an OHCHR spokesperson, told the media at a regular news briefing in Geneva Friday.

“Given the flaws of the Iraqi justice system, it appears extremely doubtful that strict due process and fair trial guarantees were followed in these 38 cases,” she added.

All prisoners had been convicted for terrorism-related crimes. They were executed Thursday.

Also in her briefing, Ms. Throssell said that the executions and the fears over due process and fair trial guarantees raised the dangers of “irreversible miscarriages” of justice and violations of the right to life.

The UN rights office has time and again raised concerns over the continued use of death penalty in the country.

So far this year, it has been informed of 106 executions in the country, including the mass hanging of 42 prisoners in a single day in September, the spokesperson added.

“We once again urge the Iraqi authorities to halt all executions, establish an immediate moratorium on the use of the death penalty and carry out an urgent and comprehensive review of the criminal justice system,” she added.

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## ‘American Dream’ quickly becoming an ‘illusion,’ says UN human rights expert

15 December 2017 – The number of Americans living in poverty and the already high income inequality could worsen further in the days to come, making the United States the most unequal society in the world, the United Nations

expert on extreme poverty and human rights warned Friday.

“The [American Dream is rapidly becoming the American Illusion](#), as the US now has the lowest rate of social mobility of any of the rich countries,” said the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, Friday, at the end of a fact finding mission to the country.

“Instead of realizing its founders’ admirable commitments, today’s United States has proved itself to be exceptional in far more problematic ways that are shockingly at odds with its immense wealth and its founding commitment to human rights,” he added.

***Assumption that poor come from minorities is wrong – UN expert***

In his statement, the Mr. Alston also stated that the assumption that poor came from ethnic minority groups is not correct and in fact there are eight million more white people than African-Americans living in poverty.

“The face of poverty in America is not only black or Hispanic, but also white, Asian and many other colours,” he said.

He went on to add that he was “struck” by the extent to which construed narratives about supposed distinctive differences between the rich and poor have been “sold” to the electorate by some politicians and the media.

The face of poverty in America is not only black or Hispanic, but also white, Asian and many other coloursSpecial Rapporteur Philip Alston

Such misconceptions included notions that “the rich are industrious, entrepreneurial, patriotic and the drivers of economic success [while] the poor are wasters, losers and scammers,” he explained.

“Despite the fact that this is contradicted by the facts, some of the politicians and political appointees with whom I spoke were completely sold on the narrative of such scammers sitting on comfortable sofas, watching colour TVs, while surfing on their smartphones, all paid for by welfare.”

“I wonder how many of these politicians have ever visited poor areas, let alone spoken to those who dwell there,” he noted.

***Proposed policy and welfare cuts could ‘essentially shred’ safety nets – UN expert***

Further in the statement, the Special Rapporteur also expressed the fear that proposed changes in US tax and welfare policies could have “devastating consequences” for the poorest in the country and make it the “most unequal society in the world.”

“The dramatic cuts in welfare, foreshadowed by President [Donald] Trump and [House of Representatives] Speaker [Paul] Ryan, and already beginning to be implemented by the administration, will essentially shred crucial dimensions of a safety net that is already full of holes.”

“Several administration officials told me that as far as welfare reform is concerned, states are, in Justice Louis D. Brandeis’ famous phrase, ‘laboratories of innovation.’ Recent proposals to drug-test welfare recipients in Wisconsin and West Virginia, along with Mississippi’s recent purge of its welfare rolls, raise concerns that the administration would happily look the other way while states conducted what were in essence unethical experiments on the poor.”

Mr. Alston’s final report on his US visit will be available in Spring 2018 and will be presented to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in June 2018. The statement he delivered in Washington DC today can be [found here](#).

During his [two-week mission](#), at the invitation of the federal government, the UN expert visited California, Alabama, Georgia, West Virginia and Washington, D.C., as well as Puerto Rico.

UN Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

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## [UN rights office urges El Salvador to reform ‘draconian’ abortion laws](#)

15 December 2017 – The United Nations human rights wing has called on the Latin American nation, El Salvador, to immediately halt the application of a law that unduly penalizes women for abortion-related offenses and to review all cases to ensure their compliance with international human rights standards.

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)), [at least 42 women have been convicted of attempted or aggravated homicide](#) after suffering miscarriages or other complications under the Penal Code since 1988.

The law, which a spokesperson for OHCHR described as “one of the most draconian abortion laws in the world” completely prohibits access to abortion regardless of the circumstances, including if a woman’s life is at risk or if she has suffered sexual violence.

The specific section of the Penal Code is Article 133.

In one of the most recent instances, on Wednesday, the Second Appeal Court of San Salvador upheld a 30-year prison sentence against Teodora Vasquez for aggravated homicide.

Ms. Vasquez was in the ninth month of her pregnancy when she suffered intense pain, and called the emergency services before passing out. She awoke to find her baby had been stillborn. She was accused of deliberately ending her pregnancy and was sentenced to 30 years in prison in January 2008.

During his [visit to El Salvador](http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=58118) last month, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, met with Ms. Vasquez and three other women at the Ilopango women's rehabilitation centre.

They all had suffered miscarriages or other obstetric emergencies.

#### *Women living in poverty affected disproportionately*

According to the UN rights office, women in poverty are worst impacted.

"It is important to highlight here, as the High Commissioner has done, that El Salvador's Penal Code disproportionately affects women living in poverty, such as Teodora," said Liz Throssell, the OHCHR spokesperson.

"We have not seen women from wealthier backgrounds jailed under similar circumstances in El Salvador," she added, calling on the country to comply with its international human rights obligations and lift the absolute prohibition on abortion.

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## [Rohingya refugees face 'multitude of protection risks,' warns UN agency](#)

15 December 2017 – The United Nations refugee agency said on Friday that it is concerned about the deteriorating environment in which Rohingya refugees are living, especially children, who make up 55 per cent of the Rohingya refugee population in Bangladesh.

"UNHCR [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees] is increasingly worried about the [deterioration of the overall protection environment](#), Babar Baloch, the agency's spokesperson told the regular press briefing in Geneva.

In this environment, he explained, refugees face a multitude of protection risks. On Sunday, UNHCR would begin distributing clothing to recently-arrived Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh for cooler temperatures in the months ahead.

"Children, who are 55 per cent of the Rohingya refugee population, are particularly vulnerable. So are women, and they represent more than half of all refugees in Bangladesh. An estimated 10 per cent are either disabled, have serious medical conditions, or are older persons at risk," stated Mr.

Baloch.

UNHCR has been working to bolster the quality of shelters in the camps by supplying higher quality materials as well as expanding technical support for construction and drainage.

Since the beginning of the crisis, UNHCR has organized 17 airlifts – sending more than \$9 million in aid relief items. In the last month, the agency has distributed over 15,000 new shelter kits and more than 40,000 core relief items.

UNHCR also began distributing compressed rice husks for cooking fuel. This spares children from gathering firewood in adjacent forests – putting them at risk and degrading the environment by stripping woodland.

Meanwhile, in responding to a diphtheria outbreak in Cox's Bazar, UNHCR turned part of its Transit Centre in Kutupalong into a treatment and isolation facility in which patients are managed by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).

Alongside the UN World Health Organization and UN Children's Fund, UNHCR is also supporting the Bangladeshi health authorities' diphtheria vaccination campaign for all children under age six.

"We are procuring antibiotics to treat 8,000 people and training refugee volunteers to disseminate information on diphtheria, detect symptoms of the disease and direct patients to health facilities," said Mr. Baloch.

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## [Hostilities flare on Yemen's west coast, sparking new displacement – UN refugee agency](#)

15 December 2017 – As hostilities intensify in frontline areas on Yemen's west coast, the United Nations refugee agency said Friday that it is bracing for further displacement and a spike in humanitarian needs.

Following recent fighting in the capital, Sana'a, and neighbouring governorates, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)) has received reports of new displacement from Hudaydah and Taiz governorates.

"UNHCR and partners are still assessing the situation, but [initial reports](#) are that more than 1,400 people have fled from Taiz and Hudaydah to the Ash Shamateen district in Southern Taizz, and Al Fayoosh district in Lahj," UNHCR spokesperson Babar Baloch told reporters on at the regular press briefing in Geneva.

“With numbers expected to rise further, UNHCR is working with partners to be in position to support and help those fleeing,” he added.

UNHCR is particularly concerned about the fate of 1,460 Eritrean refugees as well as Yemeni civilians in the Al Khawkah area – 117 kilometres south of Al Hudaydah City.

“The area has been declared a military zone. We are arranging for emergency cash assistance to be sent to this vulnerable community, which is facing difficulties in accessing food due to the hostilities,” Mr. Baloch said.

Following days of ground fighting, aerial bombardment and shelling in urban areas, the situation in Sana’a is relatively calm. UNHCR reopened its office there this week, working with partners to resume humanitarian operations that had been halted since early December.

The blockade of Yemen, which has yet to be fully eased, has resulted in scarcities and a spike in prices – including for fuel, water, food and medicines.

While new clearance procedures on goods are also resulting in delays for offloading cargo, UNHCR has asked the authorities to expedite clearances for humanitarian shipments, especially perishables, such as medicines.

Moreover, UNHCR’s financial assistance programme, which is intended to benefit more than 17,000 vulnerable displaced families with winter assistance grants, has been postponed due to delays in funds being released from financial service providers.