

Rights defenders jailed in Bahrain and UAE should be released unconditionally, UN urges

The UN human rights office, [OHCHR](#), has [called](#) for the immediate release of a prominent human rights defender in Bahrain, after the country's highest court rejected a final appeal for his release on Monday. Nabeel Rajab was jailed in 2016 for tweeting criticism of Saudi Arabia's airstrikes on Yemen and allegations of torture inside one of Bahrain's prisons.

"We urge the Government of Bahrain to stop criminalizing dissenting voices," the statement read. Mr. Rajab's comments online were made in 2015, when Saudi Arabia formed a coalition siding with the pro-Government fight in Yemen against Houthi rebels.

One tweet read, "we have the right to say no to the war in #Yemen and should struggle for peace and security but not bloodshed #Sanaa." He also criticized conditions inside Bahrain's Jau Prison, which are notoriously poor.

Rajab was convicted on charges of "spreading false news and rumors in time of war", "insulting foreign countries" and "insulting publicly the interior ministry".

OHCHR Spokesperson, Ravina Shamdasani, briefing reporters at the UN in Geneva, urged the Government of Bahrain "to ensure that all Bahrainis are able to exercise their rights to freedom of opinion and expression without fear of arbitrary detention." The [UN Working Group of Arbitrary Detention](#) last year declared Rajab's detention to be arbitrary.

Monday's court decision brings into focus the tight lid on Government critics in Bahrain, the Spokesperson said, evidenced by targeted arrests, detention, travel bans, harassment, threats, revocation of citizenship and other means.

Several cases of civil society activists and their families suffering retaliation in Bahrain for seeking to engage with UN human rights officials are highlighted in the Secretary-General's latest annual [report on reprisals](#), and in some cases, activists have been accused of terrorism-related offences.

Prosecution for exercising fundamental human rights violates Bahrain's obligations under the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), which includes freedom of expression under the human rights umbrella, said OHCHR.

United Arab Emirates also urged to release defender jailed for tweeting

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), rights advocate Ahmed Mansoor faces a 10-

year sentence on similar charges – social media posts deemed insulting to the Government.

The Court of State Security, the highest in the country, upheld the rights defender's sentence on 31 December, and issued a one-million dirham fine; roughly \$272,000.

In May 2018, Mr. Mansoor was jailed along with four others, following the comments, accused of using social media to “publish false information” that harms “national unity” and damages “the country's reputation.”

Ms. Shamdasani said the conviction was another case of “harsh sentencing” for Mr. Mansoor, related to “his exercise of the right to freedom of expression and opinion.”

“We urge the Government of the UAE to promptly and unconditionally release Mansoor and to ensure that individuals are not penalized for expressing views critical of the Government or its allies,” she said in a briefing [statement](#) to reporters.

The number of reprisals against those who cooperate with the United Nations and work to uphold human rights highlighted in the UN Chief's annual report, exposes a “shameful” level of retaliation suffered in 38 countries, some of which are members of the Human Rights Council.

Acts of retaliation, including allegations of killing, torture, and public stigmatization campaigns, the report shows, inhibit the work of the UN and its partner organizations.

Bangladesh elections: Hold those responsible accountable for ‘violent attacks and intimidation’

Violence and alleged human rights violations in Bangladesh “before, during and after” 30 December elections have prompted the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to call on Friday for those responsible to be held to account.

“There are credible reports of fatalities and numerous injuries on polling day alone”, OHCHR spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani said in Geneva on Friday.

Amidst allegations of vote-rigging, a landslide victory was declared for incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, with the opposition leader rejecting the results.

“There are worrying indications that reprisals have continued to take place, notably against the political opposition, including physical attacks and ill-treatment, arbitrary arrests, harassment, disappearances and filing of criminal cases”, continued the spokesperson, noting reports of disproportionate “violent attacks and intimidation” by ruling party activists, and, in some cases, with the involvement of law enforcement officials.

We call on the authorities to take urgent measures to prevent further reprisals – *UN rights office spokesperson*

Ms. Shamdasani cited reports of media intimidation and property damage, as well as other constraints that have hindered free and public reporting on the elections.

She asserted that at least two journalists covering the election have been arrested under the 2018 Digital Security Act, which, according to news reports, suppresses free speech and press freedom.

Moreover, since 10 December at least 54 news and other websites have been blocked, and temporary internet restrictions around election day have constrained freedom of expression.

Pointing to reports of police breaking up peaceful protests demanding a re-election, and arrests under laws such as the Digital Security Act, she said that the space for human rights defenders and organizations, political opposition and the general public, to speak out about the election, had become “restricted”.

“Restrictive legislation, including this Act, should be reformed so that human rights defenders, civil society, journalists and all members of the public are protected in their exercise of the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly and association and engage freely in debating the election and Bangladesh’s democratic and development processes”, stressed the OHCHR spokesperson.

The UN agency urged the authorities to carry out “prompt, independent, impartial and effective investigations” into all alleged violence and human rights violations surrounding the elections, and to hold those responsible accountable, “regardless of their political affiliations”.

OHCHR also encouraged the national Human Rights Commission to play an independent and proactive role.

“We call on the authorities to take urgent measures to prevent further reprisals, and to ensure that law enforcement authorities exercise their powers strictly in accordance with the rule of law and principles of legality and proportionality,” Ms. Shamdasani concluded.

DRC 'calm but tense' as country awaits presidential election result

The post-election environment in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is "calm but tense" as the country waits for the results of the presidential poll, the UN Human Rights office ([OHCHR](#)) said on Friday.

Amid reports that journalists and opposition political candidates have been intimidated and access to selected media broadcasters remains blocked, OHCHR spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani warned that efforts to silence dissent could "backfire".

Her comments come ahead of consultations behind closed doors on the election, in the UN Security Council in New York, later on Friday.

The result of the delayed poll held on 30 December – which featured 21 candidates – is due to be announced on Sunday, although the DRC's electoral commission announced that this may be pushed back.

"What my colleagues have told me and they have observed is that the situation remains calm but tense ahead of the announcement of the results," Ms Shamdasani said. "There are preliminary reports of some pockets of violence and people being injured."

OHCHR has an office in the vast central African country but has not played a role in supervising the national election, which was held following a week's delay and postponements dating back to 2016. Voting across several cities in eastern DRC that have been hit by the on-going Ebola outbreak and inter-communal violence, was postponed until March by the election commission (CENI).

Last Sunday's vote will decide the successor to President Joseph Kabila, who came to office in 2001 after the previous incumbent, his father Laurent, was assassinated in the aftermath of a civil war involving numerous armed militias. Ms Shamdasani also noted reports that freedom of expression is under threat in DRC.

"Intimidation and harassment against journalists, opposition candidates and human rights defenders continues to take place," she said. "This being a very sensitive, a very tense period, we are concerned that these efforts to silence dissent could backfire considerably when the results are announced. We are watching carefully, and we are calling on all sides to refrain from the use of violence."

As the DRC waits for the results of the poll, Ms Shamdasani also highlighted evidence of other civil rights violations:

“The internet is cut off, the signal of Radio France Internationale (RFI) has been tampered with, as well as Canal Congo Television, which apparently belongs to the leader of the MLC, Jean-Pierre Bemba”, she said, referring to his party, the Movement for the Liberation of Congo.

Ahead of the presidential election, the UN’s top human rights official, Michelle Bachelet, condemned reports that police had reportedly fired live ammunition at opposition rallies.

The High Commissioner also spoke out against the use of inflammatory speech by political leaders and said that it was essential that people’s rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly were fully protected.

Renewed clashes force 16,000 into Congo-Brazzaville

In a major humanitarian development on Friday, some 16,000 people from DRC have arrived in neighbouring Republic of the Congo – also known as Congo-Brazzaville – after fleeing deadly intercommunal clashes.

Andrej Mahecic from the UN Refugee Agency, [UNHCR](#), said in Geneva that old hostilities flared up again at the end of last month between two communities in Yumbi, Mai-Ndombe Province, in western DRC.

People are “in dire need of basic assistance”, Mr Mahecic said, adding that those fleeing DRC spoke of attacks that “left homes burned and people killed”.

“This influx in a matter of days is a major event for Congo-Brazzaville,” he added. “The area is very remote, it’s not easy to reach, so we are right now, together with other agencies, including the [World Food Programme \(WFP\)](#), deploying teams to these areas and they are distributing the relief items including food and shelter materials and other items and this has been going on since 29 December.”

According to UNHCR, this is the largest influx of refugees in over a decade, since 130,000 people were forced to seek shelter amid ethnic clashes in DRC’s former Equator Province in 2009.

Refugees, mostly women and children of the Banunu tribe, continue to arrive in Makotipoko and Bouemba districts in the Republic of Congo, where they are given assistance.

[Khashoggi trial in Saudi Arabia falls short of independent, international](#)

probe needed: UN rights chief

The criminal trial in Saudi Arabia of individuals suspected of being involved in the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi does not meet the requirements of an independent and international probe requested by the UN's top rights official, [Michelle Bachelet](#), her office said on Friday.

Speaking to journalists in Geneva, Ravina Shamdasani from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)), confirmed that her office was aware that the trial was under way.

"We, as you know, have been pressing for justice in the Khashoggi case for months now. We have been calling for an investigation, an independent investigation, with international involvement, and this has not happened yet."

According to reports, 11 defendants went on trial in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, on Thursday.

Five suspects face the death penalty if convicted of the murder of Mr Khashoggi, who was a critic of the Kingdom and has not been seen since he visited his country's consulate in Istanbul, on the afternoon of 2 October.

Ms Shamdasani confirmed that the High Commissioner's office had spoken "several times" to the Saudi authorities about the Khashoggi case, before underlining her office's stance on the Saudi Public Prosecutor's call for the death penalty.

"Now while we are aware that a trial has taken place in Saudi Arabia, this is not sufficient, first of all", she said. "Second of all, we are against the imposition of the death penalty in all circumstances."

The OHCHR spokesperson noted that her office had no official representation in the Gulf Kingdom.

"We are not present in Saudi Arabia to be able to assess these trials, so we can't give an assessment of the trials ourselves," she said.

First-ever World Braille Day underscores importance of written

Language for human rights

To raise awareness of the importance of Braille for approximately 1.3 billion people living with some form of distance or near vision impairment, on Friday the United Nations is observing the first official [World Braille Day](#).

Recognized henceforth each 4 January, the Day was proclaimed by the General Assembly last November, as a means of realizing fully the human rights of visually-impaired and partially-sighted people, and bringing written language to the forefront as a critical prerequisite for promoting fundamental freedoms.

The [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) reports that people who are visually impaired are more likely than those with full sight to experience higher rates of poverty and disadvantages which can amount to a lifetime of inequality.

Around the world, 39 million people are blind, and another 253 million have some sort of vision impairment. For them, Braille provides a tactical representation of alphabetic and numerical symbols so blind and partially-sighted people are able to read the same books and periodicals printed as are available in standard text form.

Six dots represent each letter, number, even musical and mathematical symbols, to allow the communication of important written information to ensure competency, independence and equality.

[The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (CPRD) cites Braille as a means of communication; and regards it as essential in education, freedom of expression and opinion, access to information and social inclusion for those who use it.

To foster more accessible and disability-inclusive societies, the UN launched its first-ever [flagship report](#) on disability and development last year, coinciding with the International Day for Persons with Disabilities on which Secretary General António Guterres urged the international community to take part in filling inclusion gaps.

“Let us reaffirm our commitment to work together for an inclusive and equitable world, where the rights of people with disabilities are fully realized,” he said.