

French full-body veil ban, violated women's freedom of religion: UN Human Rights Committee

Following complaints by two French Muslim women, fined for wearing a full-body veil or niqab, a UN Committee of independent human rights experts [ruled in their favour](#) on Tuesday, stating that their freedom to practice their religion had been infringed.

The Committee, mandated with monitoring the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, received the two complaints in 2016.

The women had been prosecuted, convicted and fined in 2012 for wearing the niqab, based on a 2010 French law which stipulates that "no one may, in a public space, wear any article of clothing intended to conceal the face." The law has the effect of banning the wearing of the full Islamic veil in public, which covers the whole body, leaving only a narrow slit for the eyes.

The Committee of 18 independent experts from around the world, stated in two rulings, that the right to practice one's religion includes the wearing of distinctive clothing and head coverings.

"The State has not demonstrated how the full veil presents a threat in itself for public security to justify this absolute ban," the decision read, adding that the French Government had not adequately explained why hiding one's face is forbidden for religious reasons, while it is authorized in other contexts such as sports, or artistic settings.

The experts also concluded that the ban, rather than protecting fully veiled women, could have the effect of confining them to their homes, impeding their access to public services and marginalizing them.

The Committee acknowledged that Governments' law enforcement entities must be able "in some circumstances" to demand that individuals show their faces, meaning they would have to uncover them in specific and "concrete situations", where public security was at stake, or for formal identification purposes.

Committee members noted, however, that the scope of the French law was not limited to such specific contexts and that it prevents people from hiding their faces in public spaces "at all times".

"The decisions are not directed against the notion of secularity, nor are they an endorsement of a custom which many on the Committee, including myself, regard as a form of oppression of women," said Yuval Shany, Chair of the Committee.

He explained that the decisions reflected the position that a general criminal ban did not allow for a reasonable balance between public interests and individual rights.

Anyone can bring an alleged violation of human rights to the attention of the United Nations committees tasked with monitoring the realization of various international human rights treaties, and thousands of people around the world do so every year. Once a case has been deemed admissible and a decision has been made, there is no possibility to appeal against the committees' decisions, as they are final.

If a committee concludes that a violation of a treaty has taken place, the decisions – which are not legally-binding – offer recommendations for the State involved in the case, which then has 180 days to provide information on the steps it has taken to implement those recommendations.

In these two specific cases, recommendations include a compensation of the two petitioners, and measures to prevent similar violations in the future, including a review of the 2010 law.

[‘Never give up’: UN chief’s message for 2018 UN Day](#)

Marking the 2018 United Nations Day, which falls on 24 October, Secretary-General António Guterres is urging the men and women of the UN, and those they serve, to “never give up” tackling the world’s many challenges.

In a [video](#) released in advance of UN Day, Mr. Guterres said that, despite the odds and obstacles, and growing inequality “we don’t give up because we know by reducing inequality we increase hope and opportunity and peace around the world.”

The UN chief made clear the Organization’s determination to implement climate action, fight for human rights and the life of peace that everyone deserves to enjoy: “On United Nations Day, let us reaffirm our commitment. To repair broken trust. To heal our planet. To leave no one behind. To uphold dignity for one and all, as united nations.”

UN day commemorates the anniversary of the entry into force of the [UN Charter](#) in 1945. With the ratification of this founding document by the majority of its signatories, including the five permanent members of the Security Council, the United Nations officially came into being.

Between October and November, visitors to UN Headquarters can see a photo exhibition called “People on the Move,” which is being displayed in the

Visitor's Lobby of the General Assembly building, in connection with 2018 UN Day.

The exhibition captures moments in time from the last seven decades of the millions of those who have, for one reason or another, become people on the move.

You can find out more about the UN charter, the history of the Organization and how to visit UN headquarters in Geneva [here](#).

[As human caravan moves through Mexico, 'full respect' needed for national control of borders: UN chief](#)

With more than 7,000 Central-American refugees now on the march through Mexico towards the southern border of the United States in search of safety and work, all countries involved are being urged by the UN to liaise with key agencies on the ground providing support.

Answering questions from reporters at the daily press briefing on Monday, UN Deputy Spokesperson, Farhan Haq, said that the [International Organization for Migration \(IOM\)](#) and the UN refugee agency ([UNHCR](#)), had been boosting resources on the ground, as the caravan of mainly Honduran refugees and migrants made its way north, across the border between Guatemala and Mexico.

Mr. Haq said that UN [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres was urging all parties to abide by international law, including the principle of "full respect for countries' rights to manage their own borders."

According to media reports, what started as a small group of under 200 just a few days ago, has grown considerably. Mr. Haq told journalists that "it is estimated that the caravan comprises some 7,233 persons, many of whom intend to continue the march north."

US President Donald Trump has reportedly responded to the march, by threatening to cut off foreign aid to Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador should the caravan of people fleeing their homeland, attempt to cross into the US illegally.

Earlier this week, a [UN rights expert](#) urged Member States not to prioritize security concerns over the basic human rights of migrants and refugees.

"UNHCR has reinforced its capacity in Southern Mexico, with the deployment of an emergency team drawn from across Mexico's operations," said Mr. Haq. "The

office now has 32 people on the ground, in the border, Ciudad Hidalgo, and Tapachula.”

He added that these numbers will increase in the coming days, explaining that the agency’s aim was to ensure that travelers are fully informed regarding their rights to asylum, along with providing legal advice and humanitarian assistance.

The IOM has reported large numbers of people arriving in Mexico who will likely remain in the country for an “extended period,” Mr. Haq said, explaining that most individuals have crossed irregularly and are gathering in makeshift shelters.

Darfur: Inter-communal tensions still high despite improved security, Mission head tells Security Council

While security has improved in Darfur, inter-communal tensions in the conflict-plagued region of Sudan are still high, with clashes over land and livestock, the head of the joint United Nations-African Union peacekeeping mission said on Monday.

Briefing the Security Council, via video conference, Jeremiah Mamabolo the head of the AU-UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) also said there was “continuing concern” voiced by displaced civilians (IDPs) over continued attacks and harassment, the destruction of farms, land occupation and livestock theft.

“UNAMID continues to focus on early warning, preventive measures, capacity-building and efforts to address the root causes of conflicts,” he said.

The Mission was established in 2007 following a brutal civil war that broke out in 2003 and led to the deaths of tens of thousands of Darfuris and the displacement of nearly two million civilians, amidst allegations of ethnic cleansing of non-Arabs. Widespread atrocities, including murder and rape were reported in the fighting between Sudanese Government troops and militias and other armed rebel groups.

Mr Mamabolo told Council Members that on the humanitarian front, aid agencies continue to provide assistance to people in need, despite limited funding and problems accessing some affected areas.

Drawing attention to the importance of upholding the highest principles of human rights, the senior UN official noted a decrease in new cases of human

rights violations and abuses in the areas the Mission is responsible for.

Some 134 new cases involving 304 victims were documented by UNAMID during the current reporting period, compared to 169 cases involving just 508 victims in the period 16 February-10 June, he said, noting that most violations were reported in and around internally displaced persons (IDP) camps.

“Our focus should be on building the capacity of the Government of Sudan to deal squarely with these challenges and to discharge its primary responsibility of protecting civilians and IDPs, providing security, addressing lack of confidence in reporting cases to authorities and lack of adequate law enforcement authorities and inability to provide basic social services.”

In his briefing, Mr. Mamabolo also told the 15-member Council that the Mission has embarked on its reconfiguration and drawdown, and is in the process of relocating its headquarters from El Fasher to Zalingei.

Alongside the reduction of military personnel at the Mission, the process is being finalized to reduce civilian staff – both national and international, he added. In addition, ten team sites are slated for closure by the end of the year and three sector headquarters by June next year.

“We continue to monitor the impact on the security situation and protection of civilian in areas from which UNAMID has withdrawn. So far, we have not witnessed any adverse impact,” he said.

[‘Many challenges to overcome’ at UN, in fight against abuse: victims’ advocate](#)

The UN is committed to recognizing the rights of victims of sexual exploitation by UN personnel but, when it comes to preventing and responding to abuse, there is still “a long way to go, and many challenges to overcome,” says the UN’s first-ever [Victims’ Rights Advocate](#) Jane Connors.

Ms. Connors’ post was established by the [UN Secretary-General](#) in 2017, a year that saw 62 allegations of abuse by UN personnel.

Her role – ensuring that the rights and dignity of victims are at the forefront of the fight against sexual exploitation and abuse – is part of António Guterres’s strategy to transform the UN’s approach to preventing and combating sexual exploitation and abuse by UN staffers.

Her work has been supported on the ground this year by Field Victims' Rights Advocates based in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti and South Sudan.

The Field Advocates are the main contact for victims on the ground, and they ensure that victims receive appropriate and adequate help from the United Nations. They also work closely with partners, such as humanitarian actors, as well as civil society, including local human rights organizations.

Haiti: dealing with paternity claims

In Haiti, Field Advocate Guiseppe Calandruccio has taken action to improve and better coordinate the UN response to paternity claims arising from sexual exploitation and abuse, providing survivors with the necessary information on the status of their cases, which enables them to ensure their children get the support they deserve.

In an interview with UN News, Mr. Calandruccio said that a number of victims filed paternity claims in connection to alleged exploitation: "Paternity claims means children. These children need the necessities of daily life. One project we recently launched was a package to enable those children to attend school, so financial assistance to ensure that school fees and other needs are covered, that they have lunchboxes. This makes a big difference because children can join society and feel like everybody else."

South Sudan: providing services for victims of sexual abuse

Over the past year, South Sudan Field Advocate, Stephani Scheer, has dealt with by issues such as paternity claims and sexual abuse resulting in pregnancy.

Ms. Scheer has been successful in ensuring that victims and complainants access the necessary services, medical, psychosocial and social services, which has been made possible through networking and building relationships with partners throughout South Sudan and by selecting the appropriate victim assistance service providers.

Central African Republic: improving access to justice

In the Central African Republic (CAR), Natalie Ben Zakour Man is working to ensure that legal assistance is provided to victims in respect of paternity claims and access to justice.

Speaking to UN News, Ms. Zakour Man said that a big problem faced by young girls in CAR is marginalization and stigmatization, the consequences of which are "enormous."

Often one of the first people to contact victims, Ms. Zakour Man works to ensure that their complaints are dealt with confidentially, and that they are protected and not further exposed.

Reporting of abuse in CAR is now being strengthened, says Ms. Zakour Man, by

a recent information-sharing agreement between the UN, the country team and the CAR Government.

“Many areas for improvement”

Ms. Connors Jane Connors spent much of her first year meeting victims confidentially face-to-face, and hearing first-hand how they felt let down, and distrustful of the UN.

Following these field visits, she has noted many areas for improvement: victims need better follow-up on the status of their cases; the range of services for victims, and access to justice and legal assistance, needs to be improved; and there needs to be a more resolute approach to prevention, accountability and combating impunity.

“We cannot allow the abhorrent conduct of a few to tarnish the work of thousands of women and men who work for the UN, uphold the values of the [UN Charter](#) and serve with pride and professionalism, often in dangerous or difficult settings,” said Ms. Connors.

Reasons for sexual exploitation by UN personnel, she continued, include “lack of training, ignorance or lack of acceptance of UN rules and values, inadequate screening and vetting and, above all, impunity. Sexual exploitation and abuse in peacekeeping and humanitarian contexts mirror similar patterns of behaviour in societies generally.”

Looking at her second year priorities, Ms. Connors will focus on raising awareness on victims’ rights, working with the UN system and experts to develop a code on victims’ rights, and reaching out to other bodies in the humanitarian, sporting and faith-based sectors whose work has been compromised by the sexual misconduct of their members, so that the rights of victims are central to their strategies on prevention and response.