



Bi-Weekly Press Briefing 22 November 2022

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Story

PRESS BRIEFING BY THE UNITED NATIONS INFORMATION SERVICE

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Human Rights Council

Rolando Gomez, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said the Human Rights Council's Special Session on Iran would take place at 10am on 24 November, in Room XX and would last all day. The session which had been requested by Germany and Iceland was now supported by 49 States, including Guatemala and Switzerland. Volker Türk would address the Council for the first time in his capacity as High Commissioner, and the Special Rapporteur on Iran would also be present in person. Iran would also take the floor as concerned country, and the Foreign Minister of Iceland would also be present in person to address the Council. The key element discussed would be the establishment of an independent fact-finding mission on Iran, to investigate violations in human rights, particularly relating to this year's protests.

Responding to questions, Mr. Gomez said that around 20 statements were anticipated from civil society representatives. Efforts were being made to allow victims and witnesses to testify before the Council on Thursday. The voices of civil society were invaluable. Mr. Gomez said he had not seen any documents from the Iranian authorities to the Office, but he would check this.

Answering another question, Mr. Gomez said the Universal Periodic Review had adopted its report on India last week: it was available online. There were several recommendations proposed to the government of India.

Protests in Iran

Jeremy Laurence, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said the rising number of deaths from protests in Iran, including those of two children at the weekend, and the hardening of the response by security forces, underlined the critical situation in the country. The Office urged the authorities to address people's demands for rights, instead of using disproportionate force to suppress the protests. Since the nationwide protests began on 16 September over 300 people had been killed, including more than 40 children. Two 16-year-old boys were among six killed over the weekend. Protesters had been killed in 25 of Iran's 31 provinces. Iranian official sources also reported that security forces had been killed since the start of the protests.

Over 40 people had been killed in mainly Kurdish cities over the past week; significant security forces were recently deployed there, and reports had been received of security forces responding forcefully to protests in these cities. Of particular concern was the authorities' apparent refusal to release the bodies of those killed to their families. Thousands had been detained for joining peaceful protests, and at least six people connected to the protests had been sentenced to death. A growing number of people, including Iranian celebrities and sportswomen and men who expressed support for the protests, had been summoned or arrested.

OHCHR reminded the Iranian authorities that under international human rights law, they had the obligation to respect the rights to peaceful assembly. All those detained in relation to the exercise of their rights should be released. The Office also called on authorities to immediately impose a moratorium on the death penalty.

Responding to questions, Mr. Lawrence confirmed that 40 people had been killed in mainly Kurdish cities since last Tuesday, which was of concern to the Office. On Saturday night the city of Mahabad was pitched into darkness, with security forces patrolling the streets in vast numbers, which was alarming. The Office was in contact with Iranian authorities and would continue to engage with them.

Also answering questions, Mr. Lawrence said he hadn't seen anything regarding 40 foreigners that had been allegedly arrested, but he would follow this up. There had been video footage which showed forces patrolling the street in Mahabad and gunshots could be heard in that footage. The considerable number of security patrolling was of concern to the Office. He did not know if children were particularly being targeted. It was of great concern that the bodies of loved ones were not being returned to their families and he was unsure of the motive behind this. He would check regarding information on deaths in custody; so far nothing had been received.

Mr. Lawrence also said the Office was aware of events which had unfolded yesterday in Qatar during the football match opposing Iran to England. They were not in the position to interpret the actions of individuals or a team. People had the right to express themselves and had the right to peaceful assembly.

Death penalty in Saudi Arabia

Elizabeth Throssell, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said over the last two weeks, executions had been taking place almost daily in Saudi Arabia after the authorities ended a 21-month unofficial moratorium on the use of the death penalty for drug-related offences. Since 10 November, 17 men had been executed for drug and contraband offences – the latest three executions on Monday. Those executed to date included four Syrians, three Pakistanis, three Jordanians, and seven Saudis. As executions were only confirmed after they took place in Saudi Arabia, the Office did not have any information as to how many people were on death row. However, according to reports, a Jordanian man, was at risk of imminent execution. His detention was arbitrary as it lacked a legal basis and there were grave concerns on his right to a fair trial.

OHCHR urged the Saudi Government to halt this man's reported imminent execution and release him immediately, ensuring that he received medical attention. The resumption of executions for drug-related offences in Saudi Arabia was deeply regrettable, especially after a wide majority of States in the UN General Assembly called for a moratorium on the death penalty worldwide. The Office called on the Saudi authorities to adopt a formal moratorium on executions for drug-related offences, to commute death sentences for drug-related offences, and to ensure the right to a fair trial for all defendants, including those charged with such offences, in line with its international obligations.

Responding to questions, Ms. Throssell confirmed that OHCHR had engaged with the Saudi authorities. It was a deeply regrettable step that they had resumed executions for drug related offences after a moratorium introduced in January 2021. The UN was against the death penalty, and was concerned, especially about the case of this Jordanian man, as reports had been received which stated he was at imminent risk of execution. 17 men had been executed starting since 10 November, and this was continuing daily. All the people executed had drug and contraband charges, as was the Jordanian man of concern.

Ms. Throssell said the mode of execution was typically by beheading, however a lot of the process was surrounded in secrecy, and the Office only learned the names of people after they were executed. It was hard to establish why Saudi Arabia had resumed this death penalty practice now. The executions were taking place across many locations in the country. This was deeply regrettable and fell within the global trend of establishing a moratorium on the death penalty. 126 States had voted for the worldwide moratorium. The annual report by the Secretary General on the death penalty had recently highlighted a positive move towards moratorium and abolition. Around 38 States still had the death penalty and used it. It was understood that Saudi executions did not take place in public; it was difficult to get information about them. Ms. Throssell said the total number of executed people in Saudi Arabia was 144. About 17 of these followed drug related offences. Others were for political and murder and other charges.

Other Human Rights Issues

In relation with Qatar hosting the **2022 World Football Cup**, Elizabeth Throssell, for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said that there were clearly human rights concerns, including on LGBTI rights. The Office had flagged on Twitter what sports called for and what human rights called for. The mandate of the Office was to speak out on human rights, and that is what would be done.

Ms. Throssell said the Office had been following political developments in **Mexico**. The position of the Office was to call on all actors to protect the democratic advances achieved by the country and to preserve the independent and impartiality of electoral institutions.

Finally, Ms. Throssell said that OHCHR was aware of videos showing Russian soldiers being executed in Ukraine, and these were currently being analyzed by colleagues *in loco*.

Launch of the Global Humanitarian Overview 2023

Jens Laerke, for the United Nations Office for the Coordination of the Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said the annual Global Humanitarian Overview would be launched at a hybrid event organized in the Tempus Conference Room at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on 1 December at 9am. The event would be broadcast on UNTV. Questions could not be asked at the event, but there would be a press conference on 30 November where Martin Griffiths would present the Overview. The Overview was a compendium of global response plans which would cover all the humanitarian crisis to be faced in 2023 and would also provide an overall amount of money which was requested at the beginning of the year.

Responding to questions, Mr. Laerke said the document and the press release would be ready by 28 November, with the embargo to be lifted on December 1 at 6am – three hours before the event.

Launch of UNAIDS World AIDS Day Report

Ben Phillips, for the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), said World AIDS Day Report 2022 prepared by the Programme would be launched on Tuesday, 29 November in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, during the UNAIDS Executive Director's visit to the country. The report, called 'Dangerous Inequalities', would reveal how inequalities were jeopardizing the fight against AIDS. On current trends the world would not meet agreed global targets on AIDS. Millions of lives were at stake. The new UNAIDS report would set out how only urgent action to tackle inequalities could get the world's AIDS response on track. Journalists were invited to join the press conference online; details would be provided in the media advisory, which also included the link to the embargoed.

Colleagues were also invited to join World AIDS Day events in Geneva on 1 December, where member states, international organizations and communities working on AIDS would gather in Geneva for an afternoon of action and solidarity. The programme included the "United to Equalize against AIDS Red Ribbon Café", and the Solidarity Walk to Place des Nations.

Responding to questions, Mr. Phillips said the COVID crisis had knocked the AIDS response, as already overstretched health systems and outreach systems were brought to breaking point. Challenges included pushing girls out of school, which increased their vulnerability to HIV, as well as the obstruction to the preventive medical programmes because of overwhelmed health systems. The resource crunch meant that most developing countries were reducing spending on health. The economic crisis due to the war in Ukraine had also had a huge impact on the AIDS response. All these factors were being used as a reason by wealthy countries to shrink resource contributions even further and this had further exacerbated the risk. The COVID crisis was an exacerbating factor but was not the only reason the world was failing to meet the end of AIDS; this was due to failing to meet inequalities, and this would be outlined at the launch.

Announcements

Alessandra Vellucci, for the United Nations Information Service (UNIS), said the Committee Against Torture would conclude its 75th session on Friday, November 25, and would issue concluding observations on Chad, Malawi, Somalia, Uganda, Australia, and El Salvador. The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination was this morning reviewing the report of Botswana, with reviews of Georgia and Jamaica still to take place.

Ms. Vellucci said the UNCTAD press conference on the Review of Maritime Transport 2022 would take place on Wednesday 23 November. The document was under embargo until Tuesday 29 November at 7am.

UN Women were holding a press conference on the launch of the expert recommendations on Women Human Rights Defenders at risk in migration context, on Monday 28 November, as part of the 16-day activism campaign against gender-based violence. Participants were invited to wear orange to show solidarity against this violence.

Ms. Vellucci said the renewal of annual accreditations had been opened. Journalists should start responding with all the information necessary for the renewal of their accreditation.