Press Briefing Notes on Turkey, Israel and Bahrain

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(1) Turkey

In a press release issued this morning, High Commissioner Zeid called on Turkish authorities to respond to the attempted coup by reinforcing the protection of human rights and by strengthening democratic institutions and checks and balances.

“I deplore the loss of so many lives in Turkey over the weekend, and offer my sincere condolences to the families of those who were killed,” he said. “The Turkish people bravely took to the streets to defend their country against those who sought to undermine its democracy. I urge the Government of Turkey to respond by upholding the rule of law, by strengthening the protection of human rights and by reinforcing democratic institutions. Those responsible for the violence must be brought to justice with full respect for fair trial standards.”

“In the aftermath of such a traumatic experience, it is particularly crucial to ensure that human rights are not squandered in the name of security and in the rush to punish those perceived to be responsible,” he added.
The full statement is available here: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20282&LangID=E>

(2) Israel

We are concerned at the passing on 11 July of the so-called NGO Transparency law by the Israeli Parliament, which could have a detrimental effect on human rights and the democratic space in the country.

While this new law has been described as an effort to increase transparency in the NGO sector, it will disproportionately affect NGOs working on human rights, as confirmed by recent research undertaken by the Israeli Ministry of Justice itself.

The law imposes new requirements on NGOs that receive more than half of their funding from “foreign political entities”, namely foreign governments or intergovernmental organizations, obliging them to specify this information in their publications and their communications with civil servants or elected officials. The same is not required of NGOs that are funded by other foreign sources that are not classified as political entities or by private donors.

We fear that this law, which adds to already onerous transparency obligations on NGOs receiving funding from foreign political entities, will contribute to the de-legitimization of human rights NGOs in Israel, notably by branding them as “foreign agents”.

Given the recent attacks against civil society organizations in Israel by public officials and some specific groups, we fear that this law will have a chilling effect on human rights defenders and their legitimate and extremely valuable contribution to the human rights debate in Israel, including those challenging the Israeli Government's policy on the occupied Palestinian territory.

We note that many NGOs in Israel, including ones not themselves affected by the law, have strongly criticized it, as have the Secretary-General, the European Union and individual donor governments. We urge the Government to listen to these extremely valid concerns and take them into consideration.

(3) Bahrain

We deeply regret the decision by a Bahraini court on Sunday to dissolve Al Wefaq, the country's largest opposition group, following its initial closure on 14 June. In spite of strong calls from the international community for Bahrain to seek to de-escalate the worrying tensions in the country, we regret the decision to press ahead with the ban. Reports suggest that the court hearing on the ban was carried out without due regard for the principles of fair trial.

The ban on Al Wefaq is the latest in a series of measures over the last few months that appear to be designed to quash dissent. We urge the authorities, and the national human rights institutions in place in Bahrain, to take immediate confidence-building measures to ensure the rights to freedom of peaceful expression, assembly and association are respected. We urge them to review the decision to ban Al Wefaq and other organisations that have been suspended for peaceful exercise of their rights.
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