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Oral Statement

ITEM 6: Universal Periodic Review - Saudi Arabia

UN Human Rights Council, Fortieth session - 25th of February – 22nd of March, 2019

Thank you, Mr President,

The Right Livelihood Award Foundation and MENA Rights Group call for the immediate release of **Abdullah al-Hamid, Mohammad Fahad al-Qahtani, and Waleed Abu al-Khair**, all 2018 Right Livelihood Award Laureates, as well as all other HRDs detained solely for exercising their fundamental rights.

Since the initial cycle of its Universal Periodic Review, Saudi Arabia has endorsed recommendations to eliminate barriers to freedom of expression, address the crackdown on human rights defenders, and to provide an enabling environment for the work of civil society. In reality, however, civic space remains virtually non-existent in the state.

The structures put in place to counter terrorism have been widely misused to restrain the work of human rights defenders. Saudi Arabia's Specialized Criminal Court, originally established to investigate detainees held in connection with terrorism offences, is a central pillar in the architecture designed to prosecute individuals who call for progressive political reforms in the country.

Mr President,

Despite mounting evidence to the contrary, the Kingdom maintains that the rights to freedom of expression and association are safeguarded and that legitimate peaceful practices are not criminalised in its territory. In a gross distortion of reality, it insists that no one has been arrested or imprisoned for defending human rights. However, the detention of Saudi activists is an indisputable practice.

During its third cycle, Saudi Arabia has received recommendations that call for the elimination of obstacles to freedom of expression, including a number of recommendations concerning the release of human rights defenders and journalists, and the reassessment of the criminal charges held against them. Like in previous cycles it has accepted these recommendations.

Mr President,

For it to be relevant, the UPR must not be an exercise in empty rhetoric. Today, Saudi Arabia has reaffirmed its cooperation and support to the UPR mechanism, and therefore it must unconditionally and promptly implement the endorsed recommendations.

Thank you.