



SOUTH AFRICAN PERMANENT MISSION GENEVA

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Ref: 62/2021

The Permanent Mission of the Republic of South Africa to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organisations in Switzerland presents its compliments to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and has the honour to refer to the Joint Communication from the Special Procedures, reference no. **AL ZAF/2021** dated 26 January 2021.

The Permanent Mission of the Republic of South Africa has the honour to convey the attached letter of response from the Hon Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Dr Naledi Pandor to the Joint Communication from the United Nations Special Procedures concerning the registration and verification of South African nationals in Al Hol and Raj Camps in Syria.

The Permanent Mission of the Republic of South Africa to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organisations in Switzerland avails itself of this opportunity to renew to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights the assurances of its highest consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. K. M.', is written over a circular official seal. The seal contains text in both English and Afrikaans, including 'SOUTH AFRICAN PERMANENT MISSION GENEVA' and 'SUID-AFRIKAANSE PERMANENTE MISSIE GENEVA'.

Geneva, 14 April 2021

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
Palais des Nations
1211 Geneva 10
Email: registry@ohchr.org

CC: Ms B Balbin
Chief: Special Procedures Branch



**MINISTER
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND COOPERATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

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Dear Special Procedures Mandate Holders

South African Government's Response to the Joint Communication from United Nations Special Procedures concerning the registration and verification of South African nationals in Al-Hol and Roj camps in Syria

I write to you in connection with the above mentioned matter communicated in a letter dated 26 January 2021 (ref: AL ZAF 1/2021).

The concerns expressed by the Special Procedures, which are grave in their nature, have been interrogated by the South African Government and we provide the attached information (Annex A) as a response to the urgent communication.

Kindly be reassured of my Government's highest consideration in this regard.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'G.N.M. Pandor'.

Dr GNM Pandor, MP

Minister of International Relations and Cooperation

Date: 13-4-2021

Ms Beatriz Balbin
Chief: Special Procedures Branch
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
Palais Wilson – 52, rue des Paquis
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Annex A: South African Government response to UN Special Procedures Urgent Communication AL ZAF 1/2021

The South African government has taken note with concern of widely reported media coverage of alleged Human Rights abuses purportedly taking place in camps where women and children associated with terrorist groups are held in Syria. A myriad of concerns exist regarding the control of, access to, the inhumane conditions in, further radicalization of, and possible recruitment and training that is allegedly taking place in these camps.

The South African Government has a diplomatic relationship with the Syrian Arab Republic and has an Embassy located in Damascus. The South African women and children are held in camps in that part of Syria that is currently not under the control of the Syrian government but under the control of a Kurdish administration. For this reason the South African embassy in Syria does not have direct access to the Al Hol and Al Roj camps and therefore has not been able to engage directly with the South Africans in the camps.

However, the South African government and its embassy in Damascus are doing everything possible to ensure the wellbeing and secure the release and repatriation of the South Africans in the camps. The South African government has in 2019 through its official representative in the Republic of Syria initiated official dialogue with the Syrian authorities in an attempt to establish whether there are South African nationals/citizens amongst the thousands of women and children held in camps in Syria. This process has been unsuccessful as these camps are purportedly under the authority of a Kurdish administration active in that particular region in Syria. The South African government has, furthermore, later in 2019 initiated dialogue with international and national non-state groups, including the International Committee of the Red Cross and Syrian Arab Red Crescent, which have intermittently had access to these camps in order to confirm the presence of South African nationals/citizens held in the camps.

The South African government does not have direct access to individuals who may or may not be South African nationals/citizens, who are allegedly being held at the Al-Hol and Al-Roj camps in Syria. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), UNICEF, as well as the Syrian government are assisting in facilitating access. For some time the access of these organisations to the camps was either obstructed or limited. However, the ICRC and UNICEF are presently in contact with the South Africans in the camps and have reported that they are in reasonable condition. The next step is to negotiate their release with the Kurdish administration and ICRC has undertaken to try to do this on South Africa's behalf. Once released the South African government will arrange their repatriation to South Africa. Both the ICRC and UNICEF missions in South Africa have offered to assist with the counselling and reintegration of the children into South African society.

The South African government has no information on the biometric data collection exercise, the alleged transfer of individuals and/or families to newly-extended camps and the basis for detention and transfer of individuals held in the camps. The South African government has not been informed about the registration, data-collection and relocation exercise, the purpose thereof or any further activities planned in this regard.

The South African government has been approached through the South African High Court by the families of some of the South African nationals/citizens purportedly held in camps in Syria, to assist with the return of relatives (South African nationals/citizens) to South Africa. Diplomatic, consular, legal and security processes on the matter are continuing.

Any relevant information obtained that could assist the work of the Human Rights Special Procedures structure obtained will be shared expeditiously.