

Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

Ref.: AL ARE 4/2025
(Please use this reference in your reply)

19 August 2025

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacities as Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 52/4, 54/14, 52/9 and 50/17.

In this connection, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information we have received regarding **the alleged arbitrary detention and ill-treatment of Indian human rights defender [REDACTED]** while transiting through Dubai *en route* to Kenya in June 2025.

[REDACTED] is Editor-at-large and Director of Projects at the non-governmental organisation [REDACTED], an organisation that focuses on the rights of migrant workers in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States. The organisation has published numerous reports on the alleged mistreatment of migrants in GCC States and has also cooperated with a number of United Nations human rights mechanisms.

According to the information received:

On 8 June 2025, [REDACTED] was prevented from boarding connecting flight EK719 on Emirates from Dubai to Nairobi which was due to depart at 10.30 a.m. from Concourse B, Terminal 3 of Dubai International Airport. That morning, [REDACTED] had flown on Emirates' flight EK569 from Bengaluru in India to Dubai, landing at 7.05 a.m.

After being refused permission to board at approximately 9.45 a.m., [REDACTED] was detained by a male and female officer from the Dubai airport police. At the request of the police officers, she handed over her passport and electronic devices, before she was searched and taken via a service elevator five floors down to a holding area and held for two hours. During this time, [REDACTED] requested access to consular assistance, but this request was ignored. At approximately 12.30 p.m. she was moved to another part of Concourse B and placed in an isolation cell. She was not informed of the reason why she was being detained. [REDACTED] again requested access to consular assistance, but also this request was ignored.

At 6 p.m., [REDACTED] was told that she would be transferred to Abu Dhabi where she would be arrested and brought before a judge the following morning.

A third request [REDACTED] made for access to consular assistance was ignored. Police officers said they had no information about the charges she faced, but that these would be clarified by the judge the next morning. She was once again moved to another holding area where she was told that she was under arrest and had her mugshots taken but was not provided with any formal documentation relating to her arrest.

At 8 p.m., a police vehicle containing [REDACTED] left Dubai and following a number of brief stops, delivered her at approximately 11 p.m. to a building in Abu Dhabi which [REDACTED] believes was the Criminal Investigation Department. Before being brought into an interrogation room she was blindfolded. This was then removed, and she was interrogated by a man who identified himself as Omar. At this stage, [REDACTED] again requested access to consular assistance, and this request was again ignored. Her blindfold was reapplied when she requested permission to use the toilet.

[REDACTED] was questioned about her involvement with [REDACTED], its funding sources, the founder of the organisation, whether the organisation had ties with Qatar and groups and individuals with whom [REDACTED] works. She was told that her arrest was related to her human rights activism, her reporting on human trafficking and her organisation's reporting in general. She was asked whether she truly believed human trafficking of migrants was taking place in the UAE. She was told that her reporting was in violation of UAE laws, though she was not told which laws had been violated. Content posted by [REDACTED] on her LinkedIn page which related to migrants' rights in Saudi Arabia was also a focus of the interrogation. During the course of her questioning, [REDACTED] devices were brought into the room, and she was instructed to unlock them before they were taken away again.

Between her detention at approximately 9.45 a.m. on 8 June and 1 a.m. on 9 June, [REDACTED] was provided with a single bottle of water, which she refilled at a water fountain, and a single cup of coffee. At 1 a.m. on 9 June she was handed a box which contained some food.

At approximately 1.30 a.m., [REDACTED] was informed that she would not face any charges and that she would be returned to Dubai International Airport to continue on her journey. She was requested to sign a document in Arabic, which she did not understand, but was told it confirmed the return of her digital devices. She was not provided with a copy.

On leaving the building in which her interrogation took place, [REDACTED] was blindfolded and pushed into a partitioned area in the back of a black van, shackled and handcuffed. What should have been a 90-minute journey took three and a half hours, during which time the vehicle appeared to travel off-road, resulting in [REDACTED] being bounced around the back of the van. With little ventilation and very high temperatures in the back of the van, [REDACTED] sweated profusely and became dehydrated. A bottle of water with which she had been provided earlier in the day had been confiscated before she was pushed into the vehicle. Furthermore, high decibel noise was allegedly played for prolonged periods in the back of the van, causing extreme psychological distress to

██████████.

At approximately 5 a.m. on 9 June, the vehicle ██████████ was travelling in arrived at Dubai International Airport. She was escorted to Terminal 3 and placed in a holding cell. She requested permission to telephone her family, which was refused. At 8.15 a.m. she was taken to an Emirates ticket desk to book her flight out of UAE. Since the first flight back to India was not due to leave until later that day, ██████████ chose to continue her journey to Kenya in order to leave Dubai as soon as possible. At this stage her digital devices were returned to her. From approximately 9.45 am (June 8) to approximately 8.15 am (June 9), ██████████ was detained, with no possibilities of communication with her family or colleagues.

During her time in detention, ██████████ family and ██████████ attempted to locate her through calling the Dubai Airport Health Centre and the Ministry of Health and Prevention to check whether ██████████ had had a medical emergency. Both agencies unsuccessfully checked admissions to the airport clinic and public hospitals respectively for her name. ██████████ also telephoned the Emirates airline looking for information and although staff confirmed that ██████████ had not made her connecting flight, they said there was no further information they could provide. Her organisation called the Indian consulate in Dubai at approximately 10 p.m. on 8 June to report her disappearance but were told to call back during normal working hours. During the time of her detention, neither ██████████ family nor the organization where she works, had any information about her fate and whereabouts.

Without prejudging the accuracy of the allegations, we express grave concern at the reports of ██████████ seemingly arbitrary detention without being provided with any clear information about the legal grounds for it. We express further concern at the alleged failure to ensure ██████████ access to consular protection during her detention.

We express particular concern with regard to the alleged forced exposure of ██████████ to high decibel sounds for prolonged periods while she was being transferred from Abu Dhabi to Dubai, which may amount to ill-treatment or torture. We recall that in a 2020 report to the 43rd session of the Human Rights Council, the Special Rapporteur on Torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment defined as torture acts that “intentionally manipulate or instrumentalize physiological needs, functions and reactions to inflict physical pain or suffering” which could include pain inflicted through “powerful sensory or physiological irritation through extreme temperatures [or] loud noise” (A HRC 43/49).

We express our serious concern that these measures appear to have been carried out in retaliation for ██████████ peaceful work to promote and protect human rights, in particular the rights of migrant workers, and her and exercise of her rights to freedom of expression and association in this regard.

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, please refer to the **Annex on Reference to international human rights law** attached to this letter which cites international human rights instruments and standards relevant to these allegations.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and/or comment(s) you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please provide detailed information to clarify the legal and factual basis for the detention and enforced disappearance of [REDACTED]. Please explain how this is compatible with international human rights norms and standards, including not to be arbitrarily detained and to freedom of expression and association.
3. Please provide detailed information about the reasons for restricting the access of [REDACTED] to consular assistance during her detention and explain how this is compatible with article 36 of the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations.
4. Please explain whether there has been any investigation into the above-mentioned allegations of acts which may amount to ill-treatment or torture, as required by international law, and please provide the results of it, including in terms of accountability for persons found responsible of any violation. If there has been no investigation, please explain why.
5. Please indicate what concrete steps have been taken to ensure that the right of freedom of expression and association, including to promote and protect migrant labour rights, is respected in line with international standards.

This communication and any response received from your Excellency's Government will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) within 60 days. They will also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, we urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person(s) responsible for the alleged violations.

We may publicly express our concerns in the near future as, in our view, the information upon which the press release will be based is sufficiently reliable to indicate a matter warranting immediate attention. We also believe that the wider public should be alerted to the potential implications of the above-mentioned allegations. The press release will indicate that we have been in contact with your Excellency's Government's to clarify the issue/s in question.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Mary Lawlor
Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

Gabriella Citroni
Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

Irene Khan
Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion
and expression

Gina Romero
Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association

Annex

Reference to international human rights law

In connection with above alleged facts and concerns, we would like to refer your Excellency's Government to articles 2, 7, 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which guarantee that every person is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, guarantee that all are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law and the right to freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

The right to freedom of opinion and expression is enshrined in article 19 of the UDHR and includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. It includes not only the exchange of information that is favourable, but also that which may criticize, shock, or offend. Any restriction on the right to freedom of expression must be provided by law; be necessary and proportionate and pursue one of the legitimate aims for restriction, which are the respect of the rights or reputations of others and the protection of national security or of public order (*ordre public*), or of public health or morals.

Moreover, we would like to draw your Government attention to the principles enunciated by Human Rights Council resolution 24/5, and in particular operative paragraph 2, which "reminds States of their obligation to respect and fully protect the [right] of all individuals to... associate freely, online as well as offline... including human rights defenders... seeking to exercise or to promote these rights, and to take all necessary measures to ensure that any restrictions on the free exercise of the [right] to freedom of... association are in accordance with their obligations under international human rights law".

We would also like to draw the attention of your Excellency's Government to Human Rights Council resolution 12/16, calling on States to recognise the exercise of the right to freedom of opinion and expression as one of the essential foundations of a democratic society. This right applies online as well as offline. Any limitation to the right to freedom of expression must meet the criteria established by international human rights standards, such as article 29 of the UDHR. Under these standards, limitations must be determined by law and must conform to the strict test of necessity and proportionality, must be applied only for those purposes for which they were prescribed and must be directly related to the specific need on which they are predicated.

We also refer to Human Rights Council resolution 13/13, which urges States to put an end to and take concrete steps to prevent threats, harassment, violence and attacks by States and non-State actors against all those engaged in the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

We wish to recall that the failure to acknowledge a deprivation of liberty by State agents or the refusal to acknowledge detention are constitutive elements of an enforced disappearance, regardless of the duration of the deprivation of liberty or

concealment concerned. We draw your Excellency's Government's attention to the United Nations Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances, which establishes that no State shall practice, permit or tolerate enforced disappearances, in particular we recall articles 9 and 10(2), which spells out the rights to a prompt and effective judicial remedy to determine the whereabouts of persons deprived of their liberty and States obligation to provide accurate information on the detention of such persons and their place or places of detention, including transfers, shall be made promptly available to their family members, their counsel or to any other persons having a legitimate interest in the information unless a wish to the contrary has been manifested by the persons concerned.

Furthermore, we would like to refer your Excellency's Government to the fundamental principles set forth in the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, also known as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. In particular, we would like to refer to articles 1 and 2 of the Declaration which state that everyone has the right to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels and that each State has a prime responsibility and duty to protect, promote and implement all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

We would also like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government article 5(b) of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which provides that everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, at the national and international levels to form, join and participate in non-governmental organizations, associations or groups, as well as to article 12(2), which provides that the State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of everyone against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the Declaration.

In this connection, we would also like to refer your Excellency's Government to the report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders 'Refusing to turn away: human rights defenders working on the rights of refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers', presented at the General Assembly in 2022.¹ In particular, we would like to draw the attention of your Excellency's Government to the conclusions and recommendations of the report,² including her recommendation that States:

- a) Take all measures necessary to ensure that human rights defenders are protected from violence, retaliation, threats, discrimination and other kinds of pressure or arbitrary action by State and non-State actors as a consequence of their work;
- b) Condemn publicly all instances of violence, discrimination, intimidation or reprisals against them and emphasize that such practices can never be justified;

¹ A/77/178

² Ibid, paras 114-117

- c) Investigate and prosecute any attacks by State and non-State actors against human rights defenders, their families, associates or legal representatives;
- d) Recognize publicly the important role played by these defenders and the legitimacy of their work.

We would also like to bring to your Excellency's Government attention the legal and procedural safeguards against ill-treatment including the right to contact one's family as provided in the UN Body of Principles for the Protection of Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment (Body of Principles). According to the Body of Principles "A detained or imprisoned person shall have the right to be visited by and correspond with, in particular, members of his family" (principle 19).

Finally, we would like to remind your Excellency's Government of the absolute prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment as codified in articles 2 and 16 of the CAT, to which the UAE acceded on 19 July 2012. Article 1 of CAT prohibits "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity."