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Written statement* submitted by United Nations Watch, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[20 August 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Time to reassess the Universal Periodic Review

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) was established pursuant to the Council's founding resolution, General Assembly Resolution 60/251. Paragraph 5(e) of that resolution states that the Council should review each State's fulfilment of its human rights obligation and commitments "based on objective and reliable information." Furthermore, the process is supposed to ensure "universality of coverage and equal treatment with respect to all States." According to the website of the Human Rights Council (HRC), the ultimate goal of UPR is to "improve the human right situation in all countries and address human rights violations wherever they occur."¹

Unlike the Human Rights Council's country-specific human rights resolutions, the proposal and adoption of which are driven by the political agendas and alliances of the Council's 47-member states, the UPR is meant to be universal. This means that each state is automatically reviewed at pre-set five-year intervals. Although UPR was intended to ensure that powerful states which are able to avoid censure in the Council's resolutions would not completely escape human rights scrutiny, these powerful states have managed to corrupt the process to ensure any criticism is minimal compared to the praise. Thus, instead of accomplishing its intended goal of improving human rights across the board, the UPR has turned into a mutual praise society for the world's worst abusers. Reform of this process is urgently needed.

Below are recent examples of the UPR being used to praise rather than criticize repressive governments:

Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran), reviewed in November 2019

Iran is a serial human rights abuser which tortures dissidents, executes gays and imprisons women for defying the forced Hijab law. According to media reports, in the last two weeks of November 2019 alone, government forces shot and killed approximately 1500 Iranian protesters.² During its November 2019 UPR review 95 out of 111 countries that took the floor (85%) abused the opportunity by showering praise on Iran. Only a small minority of 16 countries actually challenged Iran with the criticism and questioning it deserved.³

UPR Praise for the Islamic Republic of Iran included:

- Democratic People's Republic of Korea: "We highly commend Iran for its effort and continue to protect human rights for it people particularly children and people with disability."
- Qatar: "My delegation commends the legislative and executive development made by Iran to ensure the development of social and human rights."
- Belarus: "We highly appreciate these results (the progress of Iran), knowing at the same time that the country is forced to overcome the difficulties associated with the application of illegal unilateral coercive measures against it."
- State of Palestine: "We commend Iran's commitment to promote and protect human rights."
- Malaysia: "Iran's effort to improve the livelihood of it people is commendable."
- Indonesia: "We commend the progress made by Iran in the development of human rights."

¹ Human Rights Council, United Nations (UN) Doc. GA/Res/60/251, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/502/66/PDF/N0550266.pdf?OpenElement>.

² Special Report: Iran's leader ordered crackdown on unrest – 'Do whatever it takes to end it,' Reuters (December 23, 2019), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-protests-specialreport/special-report-irans-leader-ordered-crackdown-on-unrest-do-whatever-it-takes-to-end-it-idUSKBN1YR0QR>.

³ 85% of UNHRC reps praised Iran on human rights record, UN Watch (November 8, 2019), <https://unwatch.org/85-of-unhrc-reps-praised-iran-on-human-rights-record/>.

- Iraq: “We recommend that Iran continue efforts to implement the provisions of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights”.
- Haiti: “We recognize Iran’s effort to improve living conditions for people living in the country despite sanctions applied to it”.
- Oman: “We commend Iran in the field of human rights protection and promotion.”

Nicaragua, reviewed May 2019

Despite Nicaragua’s brutal crackdown on dissent since protests erupted in April 2018, most countries chose not to speak out against these abuses. In March 2019, the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on Nicaragua expressing “grave concern” at reports of “disproportionate use of force by police to repress social protests.”⁴ This followed Nicaragua’s expulsion of its United Nations (UN) human rights office and other international monitors. Yet, during its UPR review, 45 out of 90 countries that spoke praised Nicaragua, and another 18 countries applied some scrutiny along with praise. Thus, 70% of countries praised Nicaragua. Only a small minority of countries actually challenged Nicaragua with the criticism and questioning it deserved. Nicaragua’s representative Valdrack Jaentschke, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, claimed the country had not “punished any...human rights defenders” and had “no political prisoners.”⁵

UPR Praise for Nicaragua included:

- Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela: “We commend the government for its extraordinary successes. It has overcome the attempted coup and has once again created peace.”
- Nigeria: We “commend the government for continued cooperation and engagement with human rights mechanisms.”
- Egypt: We “welcome efforts to bring about national reconciliation and dialogue to ensure that the rule of law is upheld in the country.”
- Turkey: We “appreciate efforts to improve the human rights situation in the country, where huge transformation is ongoing.”
- Syrian Arab Republic: We “commend all human rights efforts under this presidency.”
- Myanmar: “Extends a warm welcome and welcomes efforts made.”
- Qatar: “We appreciate what Nicaragua has done.”
- Eritrea: “We appreciate seeking a solution to law and order.”
- Cuba: We “congratulate the government for human rights efforts and progress achieved.”
- Islamic Republic of Iran: “We acknowledge important achievements secured by government reconciliation and national unity, despite unlawful sanctions imposed against it.”

Qatar, HRC Member, reviewed in May 2019

Qatar commits numerous human rights abuses, including exploiting migrants, suppressing civil liberties, discriminating against women and funding terrorism.⁶ Yet, 91 out of 104 countries that spoke showered the government with praise, and another six countries applied some scrutiny along with praise. Thus, 93% of countries expressed praise for Qatar. Only a

⁴ Promotion and protection of human rights in Nicaragua, UN Doc. A/HRC/Res/40/2.

⁵ Nicaragua praised in UN Human Rights Review Despite Year-Long Crackdown on Dissent, UN Watch (May 16, 2019), <https://unwatch.org/nicaragua-praised-in-un-human-rights-review-despite-year-long-crackdown-on-dissent/>.

⁶ Outrage: UN elects Qatar to top rights body despite worker abuses and finance of terror, UN Watch (October 16, 2017), <https://unwatch.org/outrage-u-n-elects-qatar-top-rights-body/>.

small minority of countries actually challenged Qatar.⁷ Regrettably, instead of scrutinizing Qatar with regard to restrictions on free and fair elections, forced labor and criminalization of homosexuality, many countries lauded Qatar's alleged "progress" in the field of women's rights. This is in sharp contrast to Qatar's low ranking for gender equality—135 out of 153—by the World Economic Forum.⁸

UPR Praise for Qatar included:

- Democratic People's Republic of Korea: "We commend Qatar commitments and strenuous efforts for the promotion and protection of human rights."
- Iraq: "Sister country, we appreciate the developments in the area of human rights."
- China: "Welcomes Qatar's efforts and achievements."
- Brunei Darussalam: "Commends efforts by Qatar to promote the role of women."
- Philippines: We "welcome the government's efforts to uphold women's political participation and leadership."
- Libya: "We commend the progress and the positive developments in the field of human rights."
- Nigeria: "We commend Qatar for its commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights."
- Tajikistan: "We welcome measures to protect and promote the rights of migrant workers."
- Viet Nam: We commend "the strong commitment for the promotion of human rights."
- Afghanistan: "Applauds Qatar's concerted efforts to make changes to its labor laws and code."
- Islamic Republic of Iran: "We acknowledge the resilience and perseverance shown in the face of the inhuman blockade and measures imposed on Qatar since 2017."
- Turkey: "Qatar has achieved progress in the area of human rights."

Equatorial Guinea, reviewed in May 2019

Equatorial Guinea has been ruled by the same brutal dictator since 1979 and commits gross human rights violations such as arbitrary killings, detention of opposition leaders, denial of free and fair elections and censorship. Yet, 57 out of 82 countries that spoke showered the government with praise, and another 17 countries applied some scrutiny along with praise. Thus, 90% of countries expressed praise for Equatorial Guinea. Only a small minority of countries actually challenged Equatorial Guinea with the criticism and questioning it deserved. The government representative, Alfonso Nsue Mokuy, the country's third human rights minister claimed the government respects civil society and freedom of the press.⁹

UPR Praise for Equatorial Guinea included:

- Nicaragua: "We recognize the exemplary actions by authorities."
- China: "We welcome human rights efforts."
- Sudan: Equatorial Guinea is "committed to cooperate with human rights mechanisms."

⁷ 93% of UNHRC Reps Praise Qatar's Rights Record, UN Watch (May 16, 2019), <https://unwatch.org/93-of-unhrc-reps-praise-qatars-rights-record/>.

⁸ The Global Gender Gap Report 2020, World Economic Forum, http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2020/the-global-gender-gap-index-2020/results-and-analysis/?doing_wp_cron=1579601575.5648720264434814453125, (last visited January 21, 2020).

⁹ Equatorial Guinea praised in UN rights review, UN Watch (May 16, 2019), <https://unwatch.org/equatorial-guinea-praised-in-un-rights-review/>.

- Democratic People’s Republic of Korea: “We positively note that the government has made sincere efforts and progress.”
 - Egypt: “We commend efforts to reduce violence against women.”
 - Libya: “We applaud positive developments.”
 - Burundi: “We commend efforts to provide quality health services and education for all.”
 - Nigeria: “Efforts in strengthening the legal framework in the human rights field are commendable.”
 - Myanmar: “We commend achievements in education.”
 - Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela: We welcome the “great distinguished delegation.”
 - Philippines: We are “pleased to note the adoption of measures for health care and for persons with disabilities.”
 - Qatar: “We note our “appreciation for the government’s efforts in promoting human rights.”
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