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SAUDI ARABIA: C20 ATTENDEES MUST CALL ON GOVERNMENT TO FREE JAILED ACTIVISTS

In January 2020, over 220 Civil Society Organizations endorsed a statement issued by Amnesty International, CIVICUS and Transparency International announcing that they will not be participating in the sham Civil20 process hosted by Saudi Arabia, due to the Kingdom's horrific human rights record. Ahead of the Civil20 Summit on 6-10 October, we address this letter to all the NGOs and CSOs attending the Summit.

We are writing this open letter to raise our serious concerns relating to the ongoing detention of women human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia and other restrictions on civil society in the country. We urge all civil society organizations taking part in the C20 summit taking place on 6-10 October 2020 to take action in support of these brave women ahead of and during the summit.

The virtual Civil20 (C20) summit is, in most years, an important forum for civil society to bring its concerns and recommendations to the attention of G20 governments. However, the C20 this year is being used as part of an ongoing attempt by the government of Saudi Arabia to improve its image, investing millions of dollars in a public relations campaign to encourage foreign states and businesses to invest in the country, as part of its flagship "Vision 2030" economic plan. During this period, the Saudi Arabian government has taken several positive reforms regarding women's rights, such as allowing women the right to obtain a passport that should make it possible for them to travel without the permission of a male guardian.

However, women and girls continue to face systematic discrimination in law and in practice in other areas such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and the ability to pass on citizenship to their children. These reforms still do not allow women to marry without the permission of a male guardian. Women and girls remain inadequately protected from sexual and other forms of gender-based violence and continue to be detained and charged by the authorities for disobeying their male guardians. Thus, despite the commitment of Saudi Arabia as a G20 state to end all forms of discrimination against women and girls and gender-based violence, it continues to violate women's human rights and to muzzle voices that demand equality.

Simultaneously, behind the highly publicized initiatives and reforms, a brutal government campaign is being carried out, of repression, intolerance and human rights violations against its own citizens including prominent women's rights activists. While Saudi Arabian authorities point to women's rights reforms such as lifting the driving ban on women in June 2018, several women activists who led the demand for the change have been arbitrarily detained since May 2018 and are now facing trial. These women had campaigned, some for decades, for the right to drive, the end of the repressive guardianship system, as well as political and civil rights for everyone in Saudi Arabia.

For the first three months of their detention, several of them endured torture, sexual abuse and other forms of ill-treatment when they were held incommunicado and in solitary confinement with no access to their families or lawyers. The court sessions that have taken place to date have remained closed, with diplomats and journalists banned from attending, and preventing any form of independent monitoring of the sessions or transparency of court proceedings, in violation of the international right to a fair trial. Some of the women were temporarily and provisionally released but continue to face trial and remain at risk of being sentenced to prison terms. Loujain al-Hathloul, Nassima al-Sada, Samar Badawi, Nouf Abdulaziz, and Maya'a al-Zahrani remain locked up in prison, simply for demanding equality in the Kingdom.

For these reasons, and in light of concerns that the C20 process under Saudi Arabia's leadership did not fulfil the C20 Principles which emphasize inclusion of a variety of civil society actors, from local to global; transparency of decision-making; freedom and independence from undue influence by any non-civil society actors; inclusiveness and diversity; and the guiding values of human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment, Amnesty International, CIVICUS

and Transparency International decided not to participate in the C20 this year, regarding it as a process that seeks to give international legitimacy to a state that provides virtually no space for civil society, and where independent civil society voices are not tolerated.

These brave women activists must be immediately and unconditionally released so they can continue their peaceful human rights work towards a better future for their country and people. Saudi Arabia must fulfil its 2015 G20 commitment to implement Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (G20 Leaders' Communiqué 2015). Target 5.5 of the SDGs includes "*ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life*". Target 16.10 requires states to "*ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements*". Progress towards this goal is measured under SDG Indicator 16.10.1: "*the number of verified cases of killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists, associated media personnel, trade unionists and human rights advocates in the previous 12 months*" – a measure that Saudi Arabia is clearly failing under.

The C20 this year, under Saudi Arabia's presidency, presents you with a unique opportunity to use your participation to publicly and privately call on Saudi Arabian authorities to free jailed women activists and to undertake meaningful women's and human rights reforms without which any claims of "progress" or "positive change" remain devoid of substance and value to Saudi Arabian citizens, especially Saudi women.

Amnesty International, CIVICUS and Transparency International urge all participants in the C20 not to allow their participation to be used in Saudi Arabia's whitewashing of its international reputation while they continue to jail peaceful women activists and therefore, we urge all participants in the C20 summit, privately and publicly, to:

- Call on the Saudi Arabian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all Saudi Arabian women human rights defenders in detention (Loujain al-Hathloul, Nassima al-Sada, Samar Badawi, Nouf Abdulaziz, and Maya'a al-Zahrani);
- Call on the Saudi Arabian authorities to drop charges against all 13 women activists on trial for promoting women's rights;

We strongly believe that C20 participants have an opportunity and responsibility to stand with Saudi Arabian women human rights defenders in detention and encourage the implementation of meaningful human rights reforms in the country. This opportunity should be well utilized to inspire a brighter future for its people.

Signatories:

Amnesty International

CIVICUS

Transparency International

