

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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# UAE: MASS ARBITRARY DETENTION AND DEPORTATION OF AFRICANS

On the night of 24-25 June 2021, police in Abu Dhabi broke into the homes of hundreds of migrant workers as they slept, targeting Black Africans in racially motivated arrests, detained them for weeks in al-Wathba prison and subsequently deported them without due process. While in detention, the authorities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) subjected them to inhuman and degrading treatment and stripped them of nearly all their belongings.

Amnesty International spoke to 18 victims of these raids and deportations, (11 Cameroonians, five Nigerians, one Ugandan, and one Ghanaian, in total eight women and ten men) in September 2021. All 18 deportees said that the raids had targeted Black Africans in that the hundreds taken from their flats and held in al-Wathba with them were almost exclusively Black, and that the few Asian nationals arrested with them were taken because they happened to be living in the same flats as Africans. The arrests and subsequent interrogations presented a consistent pattern of racially motivated, arbitrary arrests followed by incommunicado detention for weeks on end in inhumane, overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, followed by arbitrary deportation. At no stage did Emirati authorities afford them any form of due process or the opportunity to challenge their detention or deportation order. “Ricky” from Cameroon, deported 30 July 2021, said, “We want to make the world aware of such a barbaric act... We need justice. That is our cry.”<sup>1</sup>

After news was published about these deportations, the UAE’s Ministry of Interior issued a [statement](#) on 3 September reading that the arrests “involving 376 women and men were carried out as part of legal procedures to address crimes related to human trafficking” and that “Those arrested were found to be involved in these crimes, as the UAE was proactive in enacting a comprehensive law to combat human trafficking and preserve the rights of all groups of society in a way that protects victims and punishes violators of their rights while deterring those who commit such crimes.” The Ministry further called on the media “not to circulate or disseminate any information not published by the relevant authorities”. However, the fact that these deportations were conducted en masse amounts to collective expulsion, a violation of international law. This also carries the risk of forcibly returning individuals to a country where they face the risk of serious human rights violations, in other words refoulement, hence an additional risk of serious human rights violation.

Amnesty International calls on the UAE to immediately halt racially motivated detentions and deportations and to urgently provide restitution to the hundreds of African nationals detained and deported in the operation launched on the morning of 25 June 2021.

## RACIALLY DRIVEN RAIDS AND MASS DETENTIONS

All 18 deportees interviewed reported that police forces raided their buildings around the hours of 2-4am on the night of 24-25 June 2021. Four of those interviewed said that they were able to identify some officers as being from the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), which [is part of](#) Abu Dhabi General Police Headquarters. The federal Emirati [Ministry of Interior](#) “manag[es] security and police forces” for the country overall.

All but one of the migrants whom Amnesty International spoke to had documents with valid legal status in the UAE when they were apprehended. The one exception, René Ngang from Cameroon, deported 22 August, said he also had valid legal status and was within days of having his renewed residency card delivered to him, but was unable to provide written proof because police had stripped him of all his documents and deported him without even his passport.

Kabirat Olokunde from Nigeria, an assistant at an international school, deported 22 August, who was living in the Lagym building, said that the police had not allowed her to dress and handcuffed her despite the fact that she was in her sleeping shorts. She said, “I was asking them, ‘Why am I here? I’m not a criminal. I have my papers. Why are you bringing me here?’ And they told me, ‘Emirates give, Emirates take.’” “I was also molested,” Kabirat told Amnesty. “Those idiots was touching my boobs... I told them, you touch [me] again I will slap you.”

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<sup>1</sup> All names between quotation marks are pseudonyms, to protect interviewees’ identity.

All those interviewed described the same pattern of racial targeting in the apprehensions. Deported residents of Lagym building said that there were people of various Asian and African nationalities living there, but that security forces had targeted the African residents, and that the handful of South and Southeast Asian residents detained were picked out because they were living with Africans. “When they opened one room in front of my flat, it was a Philippine room,” Kabirat noted. “And they closed the door, and they came back to pick the Africans from us.” “I will say it and I will say it again,” Keanfe Carlos Melachio, a resident of Lagym building deported 6 August, told Amnesty. “This was pure racism... The target was the Black [skin] color... In front of us at the jail they asked one Sri Lankan guy, ‘What are you doing with Africans?... Why are you sleeping with Africans?’” “Abigail”, a nurse from Cameroon who lived with her husband “Nathan” in al-Medina building, described the same situation there. “They were raiding... only the flats [where] Africans are. In my flat, 7th floor, we have three different rooms. There are Nepalese, there are Indians, there are other nationalities. But they raided only our own [room].” “Ricky” from Cameroon recalled that in his prison cell of 62 people there was a single non-African, a Bangladeshi man, “who was living with us Africans. So that’s why he found himself in this mess... They asked him..., ‘Why can’t you look for... your own nationality, or any Asian nationality, and live with them? Why did you go to stay with Africans?’”

All of those interviewed told Amnesty International that the police had forced entry unannounced by breaking open the doors to their flats. “Abigail” recalled: “On the night of the raid... they barge into our flat, they break the door... The noise was huge... My husband... heard the noise and got up from sleep. He went out [and] they were pointing a gun on him and told him to go down on his knees. He was asking, ‘What is the problem? What is the problem?’”

“Ricky” from Cameroon, deported 30 July 2021, who lived in al-Medina building as well, described the scene: “They just bash into our apartments... They start breaking in doors... They point a gun on us and they ask us to come outside, [saying] we shouldn’t take anything from the room.” He said that, for those who had wallets on their person, the police “open the wallet, they find money, they remove the money, they put in their pockets”.

Keanfe from Cameroon recalled that he was sleeping when police broke in. “It was... about 2:00am that they break into my door... I asked, ‘What is the problem?’ They just point the gun on me and said... I should turn round to handcuff me. I said, ‘But what is the problem?... Please allow me to dress.’” They took him to prison barefoot and in his bedclothes.

Four of those interviewed told Amnesty International police broke the buildings’ security cameras during the raids and that they had found that their Internet networks at home weren’t functioning. They believe this was done so that images and messages of what was happening would not get out.

Keanfe said he saw over 30 buses waiting outside Lagym building to transport those apprehended. Mary Anne from Cameroon also saw “so many police, with so many buses to come and carry Africans” outside al-Medina building. The organized nature of the raids shows that they formed a planned operation.

## **INCOMMUNICADO DETENTION**

The UAE kept the detainees from the raids in incommunicado detention for one to two months before deporting them without informing them of the reasons or affording them the opportunity to challenge their deportation order. All of those interviewed were brought after the raids to al-Wathba prison and detained there until deported, after periods ranging from 35 days to 61 days. Prison authorities separated men and women upon entry, and put the women in a large, barred-in hall. Men were taken to other buildings and distributed between a number of barred-in halls within these buildings.

Anita Nkemakafu and “Abigail,” both from Cameroon, were held the longest, for 61 days. Anita had just entered the UAE on 17 June on a valid long-stay tourist visa, and was put in prison after having been in the country for barely a week. “Abigail” was three months pregnant when the raid happened. Though apprehended together with her husband “Nathan”, they were separated at the time of detention and he was deported before her, on 5 August. They never saw each other after entering the prison, and “Abigail” did not know that he had been deported.

All detainees interviewed were consistent in reporting that they were not given any paperwork attesting that they were being held or showing why they were being held, were never presented to a prosecutor or judge or court, and never had any opportunity to consult with a lawyer, nor receive any visitors. All but two of those interviewed reported that they were never allowed to make a single phone call, denying them any opportunity to even attempt to contact a lawyer. In the two exceptions, David Lamptey from Ghana and Wilfrid Christopher Kameni from Cameroon said that after a month in prison the detainees in their rooms were given one chance to make a call if they had a number memorized. Detainees were not allowed to look up numbers if they could not remember any. David called the one number for a family member that he

had memorized. The call did not go through, and he remained in the prison without communication with anyone from the outside world. Wilfrid was able to reach his father and told him he was in prison in the UAE.

“Abigail” said that she later found out that her company had sent someone to the prison to look for her but guards said she was not there. After her husband was deported to Cameroon, he contacted an Emirati friend, who sent his lawyer to query about “Abigail”. The lawyer was able to retrieve her passport from al-Medina building where it had been left during the raid and after insisting was eventually able to convince the prison to take the passport, finally enabling “Abigail” to be deported. “If not [for that] I still would have been there,” she said. Kabirat from Nigeria said, “My mom was looking for me, my company was looking for me, my friends were looking for me. Even they took a lawyer for me. And they said they could not even find me. Even the CID – my friend contacted one CID [officer], and the CID told my friend, ‘Your friend isn’t in al-Wathba prison.’ Meanwhile we are there in al-Wathba prison.”

## **INHUMAN AND DEGRADING CONDITIONS OF DETENTION**

The detainees were held in inhuman and degrading conditions, subject to severe overcrowding in unsanitary premises, and denied access to adequate healthcare.

Women interviewed gave estimates ranging from 145 to 220 for the number held together in their hall. All the women interviewed told Amnesty International that there were only four toilets (sometimes only three functioning) in their hall and that they had to drink water from a tap in the toilet area. All detainees interviewed, men and women, were consistent in reporting that they were given no masks, that there was no periodic testing for Covid-19 and that conditions in detention were extremely crowded, so that they were put at high risk of transmission.

“Everywhere was so cooped up. We were breathing into each other’s faces,” Kabirat said. “No mask, nothing.” “No masks, nothing like that,” Keanfe likewise reported. “First of all, they bunched 61 of us in one cell. You can understand, there’s no social distancing.” He estimated the size of his cell as 10 by 10 meters, or about 1.64 m<sup>2</sup> per detainee, given the 61 people he said were in his cell. All of these men had to share three toilets, he said. “Ricky” from Cameroon, who was in a different cell in the same building, said the count was 62 people in his cell, again with only three toilets, and an area which he estimated at 10 by 12 meters, about 1.94 m<sup>2</sup> per detainee. The International Committee of the Red Cross has [found](#) that “the recommended minimum floor space per detainee ... is 3.4 m<sup>2</sup>.”

Two of those interviewed told Amnesty International that the prison administration had refused to treat them or provide them with medication they needed. “Abigail”, the pregnant nurse, described how she was denied her medication prescribed for anemia the day before the raid. “And every day I’m telling them, ‘This is my condition’... No medical attention. Nothing... I needed a doctor. There were some times that I really had abdominal pain. They will call the nurse, the nurse will come, she would tell me, ‘It’s normal.’ No, my dear, I’m a nurse like you, it’s not normal.” The only diagnostic step the nurse would take was to check “Abigail’s” pulse, after guards had bound her hands. “I went there three months pregnant, I came back and it was... five months, with no medical attention,” she summarized. “My weight was 58, 59 [kilograms] before. I came out, my weight was 51... It was horrible.” Kabirat described how guards refused to give her the prescribed medication she had for an ulcer. “I was very, very sick in the prison. And I told them... I was lying on the ground. ‘I have my drugs in my bag. Please let me just take my drugs.’”

## **STRIPPING OF BELONGINGS**

All detainees interviewed said they were returned to their home countries with nothing but their phones, passports, and some second-hand clothes – or with even less, in the case of René Ngang, who was returned to Cameroon without even his passport. All interviewees reported that they had lost belongings which they had in their residences and which were never returned to them. Items reported taken in this way included clothing, cash, bank savings, TVs, stereos, tablets, phones, laptops, driver’s licenses, birth certificates, marriage certificates, school diplomas, university degrees, professional licenses, national ID cards, and medical records, including vaccination records. “Abigail”, the Cameroonian nurse, said, “All my degrees, my diploma, my license, everything remained in the UAE... Everything. We came [home] with just passports.”

“What about my investment? What about my room?” Keanfe asked. “We lost everything. I came back home without any identity. I have only my passport on me, and the clothes they give me... In Cameroon now, without any identity [card]... I can’t move, because the only thing I have on me is my passport. No national ID card. Nothing.” “Ricky”, who communicates with the other Cameroonian deportees when he can “using somebody [else]’s WiFi hotspot,” since he has

no money to buy phone credit, said some of those deported are struggling to afford the basic necessities of housing and food.

“Abigail” described the effect her disappearance had on her family. “When I got home, with the condition I was in and how I’m looking, my family, they were really devastated... I had to rush to the hospital first [thing].” Her family told her that their mother had suffered a mental collapse,

because she has not been hearing from me... She doesn’t know my whereabouts... Immediately [when] I finish [at] the hospital, me and my husband, we had to beg money... so we can travel down to Nigeria [where her mother lives] to come and see her... So that at least she will know that I’m alive, we are not dead. Because we talked with her almost like every day. And she has stayed for two months without hearing from us. She was so disturbed [by this].

Five of those interviewed described how Emirati authorities had falsified negative Covid-19 PCR test results, needed to travel internationally, when in fact they had not been tested for weeks before being deported and were at high risk of contracting the disease in the overcrowded prison. Three of these interviewees supplied Amnesty International with their false test documents, which were issued on the letterhead of the Abu Dhabi Police General Headquarters and carry no doctor’s signature.

## MASS EXPULSIONS AND FORCIBLE RETURNS

With no legal process and no assessment of individual cases and risks to deportees, the deportations amounted to collective expulsions, which are prohibited under international customary law.

Mass expulsions also create a risk of violating the legal principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits returning or transferring anyone to a country where they would be at risk of serious human rights violation. Refoulement concerns are particularly strong for all Cameroonians from the Anglophone region of the country, where there has been armed conflict between the government and separatist groups since 2017.<sup>2</sup> The 11 Cameroonians interviewed are all from this region. “Nathan” told Amnesty, “We even begged them, we tell them, ‘There is war in our country. Please. Don’t send us back home... We are not safe in our country... They tell me that they don’t care, that is not their business.” René said he also told the Emirati guards he was in danger if sent back to Cameroon and “they said that doesn’t concern them”. He described to Amnesty International how, once he landed at Douala International Airport, he had nowhere to stay in Douala, which is in the Francophone area. “I had to trek [on foot] from Douala up to Tiko [in the Anglophone region]... I spent almost four days on the road trekking.” When he arrived in Tiko he was able to meet family who gave him money so that he could then cross the border to Nigeria. There’s “fighting everywhere in our region,” Keanfe said. “There’s nowhere [people] can stay. So I can’t even get access to my home where I was living.” “Ricky” said that like “many” Cameroonians in prison with him, he had told police that he could not return home because of the war. They replied that it was “not their problem... Either we stay in jail or we go home to our country.”

In its [statement](#), the UAE’s Ministry of Interior said that 376 “African workers” were arrested on 24-25 June 2021 and deported “in accordance with legal procedures” and “international legal standards”. It did not mention access to lawyers or court proceedings. According to the Ministry, all 376 Africans arrested were part of “organizations, which are prostitution networks, ... involved in human trafficking offences, indecent acts, and extortion and assault cases that threaten the security of society”.

Under international law, in order not to be arbitrary, detention must be prescribed by law, necessary in the specific circumstances and proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued. Migration-related detention should always be used as a last resort and for the shortest time possible. It must be based on an individualized assessment. The individuals affected must be informed of the reasons of their detention and allowed to challenge its lawfulness. Recognized refugees should never be detained for migration-related purposes. No one should be subjected, individually or collectively, to arbitrary arrest or detention.

As each foreigner is entitled to an individual decision on their expulsion, mass expulsions (i.e. expulsions without due process and without consideration of individual circumstances) are prohibited under customary international law.

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<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International, *A Turn for the Worse: Violence and Human Rights Violations in Anglophone Cameroon* (Index: AFR 17/8481/2018), 12 June 2018, [amnesty.org/en/documents/afr17/8481/2018/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr17/8481/2018/en/); Amnesty International, “Cameroon: Next government must tackle human rights crises in violence-hit regions”, 5 October 2018, [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/10/cameroon-next-government-must-tackle-human-rights-crises/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/10/cameroon-next-government-must-tackle-human-rights-crises/)

Moreover, mass expulsions prevent the proper identification of individuals entitled to international protection, including refugees. Furthermore, the UAE is party without reservations to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), which forbids discrimination “based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin.”

## **CONCLUSION**

In detaining and arbitrarily deporting hundreds of African nationals en masse, based on racial targeting and with no legal due process, the UAE violated multiple provisions of international law. These include the prohibition on racial discrimination to which it is a party through ICERD, and the customary rule of international law, applying to all states, that forbids forcible return of persons to a country where they are in danger of serious human rights violations. The detainees were deported in such a manner that they were stripped of virtually all personal possessions, in some cases including even proofs of legal identity. This action has caused devastation in the lives of some of the most marginalized members of Emirati society at a time when the UAE government presents itself as a model country for multicultural tolerance.

Amnesty International calls on the UAE to start giving substance to its rhetoric of multicultural equality by immediately ceasing all racially motivated targeting of African migrant workers and by providing restitution to the victims of the June raids, who now live in deprivation and in some cases in danger because of what the Emirati government has taken from them. In addition to restoring to the deportees all property taken from them and compensating them for pain and suffering, the Emirati government should launch an independent investigation to identify and discipline the officials who ordered and organized the discriminatory raids of 24-25 June and the subsequent deportations.