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| REFERENCE: | SPB/SHD/JT/ff |

25 October 2017

Excellency,

I have the honor to address you in my capacity as Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 35/19.

From 8 to 19 January 2017, I visited Saudi Arabia for an official country visit at the invitation of the Government. As I wrote in my report to the Human Rights Council in April 2017 (A/HRC/35/26/Add.3), this was a significant visit because it was the first fact-finding mission to the country by an independent expert of the United Nations special procedures system since 2008.

My report to the Human Rights Council also underlined that the Government had repeatedly stressed the importance it attached to the visit and to openness in interactions with the UN and the international community. I was highly appreciative of the genuine effort that many government officials made to be transparent in interactions with me and of the fact that the Government generally respected the freedom of movement of the Special Rapporteur, as provided for under the revised terms of reference for country visits by special procedure mandate holders.

The constructive interaction I was able to have with the Government during my visit continued at the Human Rights Council in June of this year during the presentation of the report on my visit to the Kingdom. Dialogue was also pursued through communications I have sent to your Excellency’s Government since January 2017. I appreciate the replies of your Excellency’s Government to those communications, which demonstrate its willingness to engage with the special procedures in a constructive dialogue, including the reply I recently received to the joint allegation letter I sent together with the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises, the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants and the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery on 11 July 2017 (AL SAU 6/2017) relating to United Seemac Co.

I am also pleased that the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism visited the Kingdom this year and hope that invitations will be extended to other special procedures for future visits.

I congratulate your Excellency’s Government for its recent decision to allow women to drive in Saudi Arabia. On 28 September 2017, I issued a press release, together with the Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice, acknowledging that it was a “first major step towards women’s autonomy and independence” and a “historic development”.

As your Excellency’s Government is aware, the issue of women’s rights, especially where it pertains to the rights of women living in poverty in Saudi Arabia, is one of the key issues I addressed in my report to the Human Rights Council. At the end of my visit in January, I made a press statement that highlighted that Vision 2030, which I praised for its ambition and as a deeply transformative plan, could be a catalyst for realizing women’s rights in Saudi Arabia. As the Vision recognizes, Saudi women represent a ‘great asset’ that is currently under-utilized and the need to recognize women’s rights points in the same direction. And as I mentioned in my report, the Government cannot remove itself from debates on the ban on driving or eliminating the guardianship restrictions, but has an obligation under international human rights law to respect, protect and promote the human rights of women. The decision to allow women to drive is a major step in ensuring respect for the human rights of women and the fact that the Government is willing to take responsibility for those rights also fits with the aims of Saudi Arabia’s ambitious economic transformation program.

In the spirit of dialogue and transparency that characterized my visit to the Kingdom in January 2017, I would very much appreciate the Government’s openness to continuing our conversation on the rights of Saudi women living in poverty. By way of follow-up to my mission report and the dialogue in the Council, I would very much appreciate your Excellency’s Government’s reply to the following questions:

* What steps is your Excellency’s Government undertaking to implement the recent decision to allow women to drive and what timelines are envisioned for making this decision a practical reality?
* Are specific measures being considered to enable women living in or near poverty to exercise their freedom of movement by driving a car? This could include graduated fees for drivers’ licences, and education campaigns to facilitate an understanding of the procedure to obtain a driver’s license?
* Will women who apply for a driver’s license need the consent from a male guardian to apply? In that context, would you be able to indicate the steps your Excellency’s Government has taken to review and amend all existing regulations and procedures that require a male guardian’s consent for women to access public services, pursuant to the order issued by King Salman of 17 April 2017?
* What steps has your Excellency’s Government taken since January to enforce the 2012 rule that women no longer need a guardian’s permission to work? I refer here to recommendation b) on page 15 of my report to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/35/26/Add.3).

I would like to inform your Excellency’s Government that this communication and replies received from your Excellency’s Government to it will be made available to the public and posted on the website page of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights ([http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Poverty/Pages/SRExtremePovertyIndex.aspx](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Poverty/Pages/SRExtremePovertyIndex.aspx)).

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration and let me express the hope again that we can continue our constructive and open exchange of views.

Philip Alston

Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights