**Call by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women to release all detained women human rights defenders, including Saudi women’s rights activist Loujain Al-Hathloul, in the wake of International Women Human Rights Defenders Day on 29 November 2020**

As International Women Human Rights Defenders Day on 29 November 2020 is approaching, we, independent experts of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (the Committee), pay tribute to the women human rights defenders who have engaged with the Committee to defend women’s human rights and advocate for gender equality and non-discrimination in every sphere of society, some of whom have been exposed to different forms of reprisals.

Human rights defenders have the right to free and unhindered access to and communication with the UN, and they should do so free from fear or retribution of any sort. Women human rights defenders bring voices from the ground and invaluable insights to the Committee, and they are key partners in the dissemination, implementation and follow up of its recommendations.

In this context, the Committee is concerned about the situation of women human rights defenders who face reprisals in many parts of the world. Of particular concern to the Committee is the case of Saudi women’s rights activist Ms. Loujain Al-Hathloul, who had been engaged for several years in promoting women’s rights in her country, including in the movements to allow women to drive and to claim freedom of movement. She appeared before the Committee in February 2018 in the context of the consideration of the combined third and fourth periodic reports of Saudi Arabia by the Committee. The Committee valued her input alongside with the information provided by other civil society organizations.

On 15 May 2018, Ms. Al-Hathloul was arrested and has since been detained on national security grounds, reportedly in circumstances that amount to arbitrary arrest and detention. According to the charges, these were based, in part, on Ms. Al-Hathloul’s engagement with the Committee.

In February 2020, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia assured the Committee that Ms. Al-Hathloul’s trial hearing would take place in March 2020. However, it has been postponed several times since then. In this regard, the Committee recalls its ‘Statement on the occasion of the second anniversary of the participation of detained Saudi women human rights defender Loujain Al-Hathloul in the Committee’s review of Saudi Arabia’, issued on 27 February 2020, calling on Saudi Arabia “to ensure her right to a fair trial without further delay, with full respect for the procedural guarantees established by international human rights law, and free from gender bias”.

The Committee is alarmed by the recent information concerning the conditions of Ms. Al-Hathloul’s prolonged detention, which have prompted her to start a hunger strike. Unlike other detainees, and contrary to Rules 26 and 42 of the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bankok Rules; General Assembly resolution 65/229 of 21 December 2010), Ms. Al-Hathloul is not allowed to have regular contact with her family nor to exercise activities, according to reports received.

We, the Committee experts, are gravely concerned about Ms. Al-Hathloul’s physical and mental health and well-being particularly in light of her hunger strike. We urge the Saudi authorities to protect her rights to life, health, and liberty and security of person at all times, while fully respecting her freedoms of conscience and expression, including by going on hunger strike.

In the wake of International Women Human Rights Defenders Day 2020, the Committee appeals to His Majesty King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud to use his royal prerogative powers to ensure the release of Ms. Loujain Al-Hathloul from detention, which has been unduly prolonged.