**Maat for Peace’ submission on “Challenges to freedom of opinion and expression in times of conflicts and disturbances”**

Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights submits this report to provide the UN special procedures with adequate information on issues of interest to special rapporteurs and to cooperate in making reports to the General Assembly or the Human Rights Council. Maat for Peace also commends selecting the theme "Challenges to freedom of opinion and expression in times of conflicts and disturbances" as a multi-year project within the framework of the mandate of the Rapporteur, as it shares Maat’s view that challenges to the right to freedom of opinion and expression in armed conflict are most common in normal circumstances. Maat’s contribution is guided by some of the questions and sub-points drawn up by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, noting that Yemen is the State that will be the subject of answers as a case study for States of armed conflict.

1. Please describe specific situations where disinformation, misinformation or propaganda have been used or restrictions have been placed on the media or access to the Internet in order to instigate, aggravate or sustain hatred, violence or conflict. What means and methods are used to manipulate information in such situations?

Misinformation and disinformation have been widely used in northern Yemen after the exacerbation of armed conflicts between the Houthis, who control northern Yemen, and the Arab League supporting Yemen's legality. The information was promoted by the Houthis through their media alongside the Saba news agency in the version run by Ansar Allah "The Houthis" in northern Yemen, where the Houthis allowed only the presence of media under their control that promoted the propaganda of the Houthi group. These propaganda and misinformation included stigmatizing anyone opposing the Houthis as an agent of the Arab League supporting Yemen's legality and stigmatization of women defending human rights in general and women's rights in particular as engaging in prostitution and practices contrary to the faith of the Houthis. This resulted in their arbitrary detention. The last women to be detained on the basis of misinformation was Intisar al-Hammadi, who was sentenced to five years' imprisonment in February 2021 on charges of indecent act[[1]](#footnote-1). and, as a direct result of misinformation and incitement to journalists, four Yemeni journalists have been awaiting the execution of an unjust death sentence handed down by the specialized criminal court in Sana 'a controlled by the Houthis, and the four journalists are Abdel-Khaleq Omran, along with Tawfiq Al-Mansoori, Akram Al-Walidi, and finally the journalist Harith Hamid, on charges of treason and espionage for foreign countries[[2]](#footnote-2). it is worth mentioning that since 2015 they have been detained in non-literate conditions where they lack health care or family visits and face patterns of abuse that amount to torture[[3]](#footnote-3). Which may result in cases of murder or extrajudicial execution.[[4]](#footnote-4)

According to reliable researches by conducted by DT Global and Ark, a wide spectrum of Yemenis believe that most media, radio and print media misrepresent correct information and promote information that serves each other's interests[[5]](#footnote-5). Disinformation about independent media, media professionals and journalists in northern and outside Yemen included the statement of Abdulmalik Al -Houthi, leader of the Houthi movement, who said that journalists and media professionals are more dangerous than the fighters they fought[[6]](#footnote-6). This has been a green light to targeting journalists, media professionals and the media in Yemen. Of course, the dissemination of misinformation and hate speech against the media and its workers has violated the right to freedom of opinion and expression and undermined the independence of the media. Maat for Peace has documented 1,039 violations against freedom of the press and media in Yemen by the Houthi group since the beginning of the conflict. These violations included 332 arrests of journalists in Yemen, 41 cases of murder, 179 cases of assault and attempted murder of journalists, in addition to 36 Trial cases of journalists, 137 cases of blocking websites, 127 cases of threats to block other sites, 62 cases of raids and confiscation of property Journalists, 81 incidents of media suspensions, confiscation of cameras, and 44 media suspensions from work. Maat for Peace confirms that the real facts are much higher than the reported, which means that these violations are systematic and deliberate, which has undermined freedom of opinion and expression in North Yemen and made the independence of the media a distant goal.

1. What role have States, armed groups or social media platforms played to instigate or mitigate such manipulation of information?

Armed groups in northern Yemen, specifically the Houthi group, have not taken any steps or initiatives to limit or mitigate the spread of misinformation, especially information that serves this group’s orientations. On the contrary, the Houthis have exploited the Coronavirus pandemic to spread a wide range of misinformation about the virus.

The Houthis spread misinformation about the Coronavirus claiming its non-existence, as revealed in a televised speech, in which the leader, Abdul-Malik Al Houthi said that “the Coronavirus is an American conspiracy.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This deliberate concealment by the Houthis of the spread of the epidemic has affected the number of infections that have been infected. It increased in light of the denial of the presence of the virus and the failure to implement precautionary measures, and exacerbated the deterioration of public health in northern Yemen.[[8]](#footnote-8)

1. What has been the impact of such propaganda, disinformation or misinformation on the work of human rights defenders, journalists, civil society, humanitarian and development organizations?

Misinformation and disinformation have undermined the work of journalists and human rights defenders and Maat for Peace documented various types of misinformation promoted by the Houthis in Yemen in order to restrict the work of journalists, the media and human rights defenders. For example, Maat for Peace documented the testimony of Yemeni journalist Hamza al-Jubaihi, who was arrested by the Houthi group on August 31, 2016 and released on September 29, 2021. In his documented testimony, he reported that he was misled during his arbitrary detention by being accused more than once of the death of his wife and children, who were armed members of the group. He was subjected to psychological torture and added that this was a recurring pattern that the Houthis had practiced with all human rights defenders in detention centers.

In a related context, **Yahya al-Houthi admitted that the Houthis are directing the media against humanitarian organizations using misleading information**. The indications of this confession were obvious to those working in these humanitarian organizations. This guidance was conducted by sharing misinformation and misinformation about the work of humanitarian organizations in Yemen both in the Houthi media and through social media platforms hindered humanitarian access to the neediest[[9]](#footnote-9). Most movements within Houthi areas require advance authorization, including for humanitarian organizations[[10]](#footnote-10). Some militants at checkpoints considered misinformation about the work of these organizations as an obstacle to their actions. They set up bureaucratic barriers for these organizations to carry out their mandated tasks. The Houthis did not know that 23.4 million Yemenis were in need of humanitarian assistance, of whom 12.7 were in urgent need of such assistance[[11]](#footnote-11). Owing to these obstacles, most humanitarian and relief organizations and United Nations programs have reduced their presence in northern Yemen and because of these barriers, the United States, Yemen's second-most funded humanitarian program, has framed the United States to stop funding relief and humanitarian programs in Yemen. The United States also rejected the Houthis' A "registration system" designed to reach those targeted by these relief programs, the Eye Fingerprint System, which was rejected by the competent Houthi authorities and replaced by another fingerprint system, which facilitates manipulation of those targeted by such humanitarian assistance[[12]](#footnote-12). The Houthis rejected this regime by misrepresenting information by claiming that these devices were used for espionage.

In the same context, in mid-2019, the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) suspended humanitarian supplies to 850,000 people in Sanaa and some areas under Houthi control, after the unrecognized Houthi government in Sanaa refused to approve a biometric registration system or something. It is known as (the fingerprint by the eye), which the WFP explained that it is necessary to prevent counterfeiting of humanitarian aid, and to ensure that it reaches those who deserve it[[13]](#footnote-13). The Houthis deliberately promoted this false information in order to facilitate the process of controlling humanitarian aid, which was evident in specific facts. In May 2021, Republican US Senator Jim Risch, a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, stated that the Houthis had taken control of the humanitarian aid of the United Nations agencies that was intended For school children, in conjunction with what the World Food Organization’s investigations revealed that a local organization affiliated with the Ministry of Education in the not internationally recognized Salvation Government, had taken control of the food aid intended for children, by placing this aid on the black market.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In May 2020, Yemeni local reports documented the theft by Ansar Allah al-Houthi of some 440 trucks with food aid, medicines, medical supplies and hospital fuel in Sana 'a, Waab and Al Hudaydah governorates, and the presence of the Stockholm Agreement's International Observer Committee on 23 December did not prevent the continued looting and theft by the Houthis. In addition, the Houthis looted and detained 697 relief trucks on roads between Al Hudaydah, Sana 'a Ibb, Taizz, Hajjah, Dhamar and the entrances to the governorates under their control, in addition to detaining 88 relief and commercial vessels in the ports of Al Hudaydah and As-Salif, including 34 vessels that they held for more than 6 months to destroy most of their cargo.[[15]](#footnote-15)

On April 20, 2020, Yemeni activists, with visual content showing food items printed on it, circulated the WFP logo in the area of Sirwah, west of Marib governorate, which was under the control of Ansar Allah, and their loyal militants, before being retrieved by the Yemeni army, forcing the Houthis out of it. The presence of these foodstuffs confirms that the Houthis are diverting humanitarian assistance, especially food assistance, instead of going to the neediest groups such as women, children, the elderly and the needy, which the Houthi group distributes to its fighters[[16]](#footnote-16). As such, the Houthi group seized 127 tons of WFP humanitarian aid on January 26, 2021, in the northwestern Hajjah, after armed Houthi personnel stormed a WFP warehouse in the governorate of Abs, unloaded it, and stole everything inside it[[17]](#footnote-17). All previous facts confirm that the dissemination of misinformation about these humanitarian organizations would have encouraged him to control the assistance, interfere with the organizations' work and extort it in contravention of international human rights and humanitarian law.

1. Please provide examples of good practices, including at the community level, to fight disinformation and hate speech during conflicts and disturbances.

Maat for Peace has shared some good practices at the local level in Yemen to combat the flood of misinformation and hate speech and Maat for Peace shows that these good practices and initiatives as they are disseminated in different regions may have multiple positive effects. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) supported a platform called "Dakkah", a platform of a local Yemeni organization called the Yemeni Information Centre, to counter hate speech, combat misinformation and promote community cohesion. UNESCO also funded the Association of Media for Peace to train Yemeni journalists in combating misinformation. In a related context, two organizations co-founded by UNESCO, SecDev Group and SecDev Foundation, work with local partners to focus on the ways in which social media platforms amplify digital harms, including by deploying tools to detect and disrupt the harmful spread of misinformation and misinformation in Yemen.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In addition, in August 2019, the “SIDC” Foundation was established in Yemen. It is an independent platform specialized in fact-finding related to Yemeni news spread on a large scale, in order to correct false and misleading information[[19]](#footnote-19). The platform also works on examining and correcting trending news on social networking sites, in a related context. The platform has an awareness role that exposes through the dangers of misinformation.[[20]](#footnote-20) Despite the impact created by these initiatives, it is still limited. In some cases, lacks sufficient funding for continuity. Providing support for these initiatives represents a positive step towards curbing misinformation in armed conflicts.

1. What other issues in relation to freedom of opinion and expression in the context of conflict do you feel should be given attention by the Special Rapporteur and why?

Among the issues that the Maat for Peace considers an urgent need to attach special importance is to ensure freedom of opinion and expression for members of minorities and immigrants in armed conflicts, and members of minorities refrain from engaging in these conflicts, but face countless obstacles in exercising their right to freedom of opinion and expression. For example, the marginalized and the servant group in Yemen face widespread violations when exercising their right to opinion and expression. According to unofficial statistics, they represent 12% of the total population of Yemen, and they are the target of hate speech and systematic misinformation in light of impunity for the crimes committed against them. The Houthis also practiced forcible detention of migrants when exercising their right to freedom of opinion and expression.

In April 2021, Al-Houthi riot forces in Sanaa broke up a sit-in for hundreds of African migrants who were picketing in front of UNHCR in Sana' a to express their views in the dire conditions to which they were subjected as a result of the disengagement, two migrants were killed and hundreds were injured, including nearly 55 women, as a result of the use of live bullets. in addition to looting their suspensions and personal items, such as mobile phones and money in their possession, while others were deported to the governorates of Taizz, Lahij and Dhamar.[[21]](#footnote-21)

On April 3, 2021, the Houthi group began forcibly transferring hundreds of African migrants’ hours after holding a peaceful rally in front of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Sana 'a. Who gathered to call for an international investigation into the Holocaust they were subjected to in March 2021, and the number of migrants forcibly transferred by the Houthi group to other areas outside Sanaa. More than 500 migrants, including 210 males, 200 children and women All Ethiopians, in addition to 45 Somali migrants, including women and children, aboard Dennat-type medium transport trucks, all the way to Dhamar province.[[22]](#footnote-22) In a connected context, Migrants who were forcibly transferred were forced to write pledges not to return to Sanaa and then to Taizz governorate[[23]](#footnote-23). Most of the time, forced deportation took place without informing organizations concerned with migrants in Yemen, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

**Maat for Peace recommends the following:**

* The Special Rapporteur should attach special importance to safeguarding the freedom of opinion and expression of minorities and migrants in areas of armed conflict;
* Call for funding initiatives to combat misinformation and false information in areas of armed conflict in general and in Yemen in particular;
* Pressure the Houthi group to facilitate humanitarian access to the neediest groups and stop spreading misinformation about these organizations;
* Advocacy for an objective report on the impact of misinformation not only on freedom of opinion but also on fundamental human rights.
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4. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Yemen’s Parallel War in Cyberspace, Foreign policy, 26 January 2022, <https://bit.ly/3ydPhZ5> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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8. Yemen: Houthis Risk Civilians’ Health in Covid, Human Rights Watch, 1 Jun 2021, <https://bit.ly/3nDpBAe> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Al-Houthi admits to financially blackmailing international organizations and preventing aid from entering Yemen, <https://bit.ly/3P4KAro> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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