

End of Mission – Oral Statement
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Good morning,

I am Leilani Farha, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing.

I am the first UN Special Rapporteur to visit Egypt since 2010. This puts me in a unique and I would say privileged position. One might say, that my visit acts as a kind of barometer – a testing of Egypt’s human rights waters.

With an abundance of caution, I might say that inviting me into Egypt to carry out a human rights assessment of housing conditions in the country is an important step and perhaps an early sign that Egypt is entering a new era. I hope to be able to work with the government of Egypt on an ongoing basis to help ensure the right to adequate housing is implemented through Egypt’s housing related laws and programs. I also hope that the government engages constructively with the recommendations in my final report that will be presented to the UN Human Rights Council in March 2019 and that my visit paves the way for a long line of Rapporteur visits.

My mission itself had its own challenges, particularly with respect to access individuals, families and organizations defending the right to housing. Confidential and unsupervised contact with witnesses including individuals, representatives of civil society and the media is essential in order for me to carry out my work and is a core principle in the Terms of Reference of the United Nations which governs such visits. A number of individuals and organizations would not meet with me or would not meet in public spaces expressing fear that talking with me about their dissatisfaction with respect to their housing situation might result in them experiencing reprisal.

That being said, I have received assurances from some of the highest level authorities that at least with respect to my visit, no one with whom I met or spoke will suffer reprisal. And I take them at their word.

Turning now to my assessment of the right to housing in Egypt.

I have to say, in many respects I was pleasantly surprised by what I found. In a country where anywhere between 40-65% of people live in informal or unplanned settlements, I thought I might learn of mass forced evictions. But I did not.

Though I did hear of some forced evictions and a number of relocations that may not be consistent with human rights standards, I also found, a government that appears committed to and serious about tackling the variety of serious housing issues that have accumulated over time.

These are early days for the government of Egypt and one can expect programs and policies to require adjustments in order to both meet the needs of its people and satisfy human rights requirements.

On the more innovative side – the government has developed a financially innovative social housing program that is trying to address the fact that that between 75-80% of households in Egypt require a subsidy in order to own a home. While the program has been critiqued for not reaching the poorest segments of society, it is reaching a vast number of people and is a public model, the likes of which is rare in an age of liberalization. My hope is that this program will receive ongoing support so that it might continue and even be scaled up.

Egypt recognizes their obligations under the SDGs to upgrade informal settlements and has commenced doing so, prioritizing *unsafe areas* or areas that are deemed to be *life threatening*, for example, flood prone areas, communities established close to railway lines or subject to sliding geological formations. They have committed to eliminating the “unsafe areas” by 2019, to develop unplanned areas in the medium term and to stop the expansion and emergence of new informal settlements in the long term.

My overarching concern is the lack of meaningful engagement with residents to determine their future. As it stands, the government’s approach seems to have centered on bricks and mortar - that is, addressing housing need through building. This is not an uncommon approach and has its merits in light of years of neglect. But the right to adequate housing will not be realized unless and until people are engaged in the housing process, and this includes providing communities with the resources necessary so that they might organize themselves and providing formal opportunities where they might claim their rights – beyond of course courts.

I think this – recognizing and harnessing the skills and ideas of its people - requires a shift in approach for the government of Egypt, but I am confident it is one that the government is open to pursuing, and it is most certainly one that will achieve positive results.

Though I have been unable to travel extensively through the country to see and learn more, I did meet with people from three communities whose housing situation deserves particular attention. Where I am concerned that the residents of the communities of Dweiqah, El Warraq, El Hataba, and those residing on 26th July Street be able to remain in their homes and communities if they wish to do so.

Let me add to this a rather sobering note. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of this visit was to hear the housing stories and experiences from a number of people in the LGBT community. While some might query my focus on this group in a rather short end of mission statement, the gravity of their living conditions warrants alarm and urgent action. The sublimation of identity, precarious housing and homelessness are defining experiences for many LGBT.

In closing let us remember that the recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.