

Statement by Raja Abdullah Almasabi to the UN Security Council, July 28, 2020

“We Must Have a Seat at The Table”

Good morning, Mr. President. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Security Council regarding how the war in my country Yemen has impacted people with disabilities.

My name is Raja Abdullah Almasabi, and I am the chairwoman of the Arab Human Rights Foundation, the only local organization in Yemen that advocates for the rights of people with disabilities. As a woman with disabilities myself, I speak from experience – I fight for our rights.

Mr. President, for years, this council has been briefed about the suffering Yemenis have experienced from the ongoing war. The situation has been described by the United Nations as the world’s worst humanitarian crisis. Even now bombs are falling, and people are fleeing in the middle of a pandemic.

This war has had an excessive impact on us as persons with disabilities.

Before the war started in 2015, the number of people with disabilities was 2 million. Now, that number is estimated to be between 3.5 to 4.5 million. There is no reliable data on people with disabilities in Yemen, and given the ongoing armed conflicts, the actual number is certainly higher than that.

The majority of people who have acquired disability during the war did so because of injuries from airstrikes, landmines and other explosive remnants of the war.

But, also, denial of humanitarian access has created chronic health conditions, especially among children, such as malnutrition. This is one of the primary reasons why many children in Yemen have acquired a disability.

Many people who had disabilities before the war have also acquired new, secondary conditions during attacks and displacement. For example, I had one disability, but because of the war I have now two: a physical and hearing disability.

When fighting breaks out, many people with disabilities find it difficult to flee the violence. Imagine having to run for your life without a wheelchair, crutches or any assistive device you need to be able to move. Imagine having to completely depend on your loved ones or whoever is willing to help you move.

Some people with disabilities end up being left behind by their families. Others choose not to flee so they don’t put their families at a higher risk by slowing them down. We saw that with families escaping fighting in Hodeidah, Taiz, Sa'ada and many other places.

Life in displacement camps has been particularly difficult for people with disabilities. Most of the camps in Yemen were not designed for us. Basic rights such as access to health, water, sanitation facilities for people with disabilities is often ignored.

Many people with disabilities face barriers in accessing healthcare. Some people need to travel up to 6-8 hours to reach emergency medical centres, through destroyed roads and with little financial resources.

Now, with Covid-19 causing a catastrophic health crisis across Yemen, people with disabilities are being left behind once again. There are no specific, targeted actions to reach them, even though we know they are at a higher risk if infected by the virus.

There is no data on how many people with disabilities in Yemen have been infected or have died of Covid-19.

The war has made us poorer. I, myself, have not had an income because I've not received a salary for four years now. Many people with disabilities struggle to find any source of income at the same time when the price of everything has increased.

Even more children with disabilities are now out of school as a result of the war.

Mr. President, as a fighter for our rights in Yemen, I need the following from the Security Council:

1. The longer the war continues, the situation will continue to keep getting worse for all civilians, including people with disabilities. We need the Security Council – *all* of you – to do everything in your power to stop the war. Stop supporting and arming those fighting this war. People in Yemen – the same as people in your home countries -- need peace and security.
2. Placing the rights and needs of people with disabilities in the minds and the budgets of the UN, INGOs and your governments is what we need.
3. Any peace negotiations must include participation of people with disabilities. Currently there are more than 4 million persons with disabilities in Yemen, but none of us have been engaged in any of those processes. This means that up to today, people with disabilities have had no voice at all in addressing the present and the future of Yemen.

It's been one year since the Security Council adopted its first resolution on the protection of people with disabilities in wars. This has been followed by commitments by the UN and governments to do better to reach people with disabilities in humanitarian responses.

However, these commitments still haven't led to any meaningful changes on the ground.

Persons with disabilities and their representative organizations are struggling to survive. I call on the Security Council and Member States to allocate resources and targeted funding to support them in Yemen through financial and technical support.

Mr. President, thank you for making my voice heard today. I leave you with a simple plea – you can do more. You can do better. We are not an afterthought. Persons with disabilities must be part of every statement you release and every resolution you consider. We must have a seat at the table.

