

## HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

350 Fifth Avenue, 34<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10118-3299  
Tel: 212-290-4700  
Fax: 212-736-1300

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February 3, 2019

His Holiness  
Pope Francis  
The Apostolic Palace – Vatican City

## Re: UAE Papal Visit

Your Holiness,

In advance of your participation in the International Interfaith Meeting on Human Fraternity in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and your scheduled meeting with Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, on February 4, 2019, I am writing on behalf of Human Rights Watch to bring your attention to some of our concerns about human rights in the UAE and the UAE's role in abuses in Yemen. We hope you will use your good offices to raise some of these rights abuses with the UAE authorities.

Human Rights Watch is an independent nongovernmental organization dedicated to defending and protecting human rights. We monitor and report on human rights violations in over 100 countries around the world, including the UAE and Yemen.

The UAE plays a prominent role in the [Saudi](#)-led coalition's military operations in Yemen. Since March 2015, the coalition has indiscriminately bombed homes, markets, and schools, impeded the delivery of humanitarian aid, and used widely banned cluster munitions. Human Rights Watch has documented nearly 90 apparently unlawful coalition attacks, some of them likely war crimes. The UAE and UAE-led proxy forces have arbitrarily detained, [forcibly disappeared](#), and tortured Yemenis in southern and eastern Yemen, including Yemeni activists who have criticized coalition abuses.

You have repeatedly urged the international community to make every effort to end the Yemeni crisis. We urge you to use this upcoming visit to press the UAE to investigate alleged serious violations by its armed forces and Yemeni forces it supports, to appropriately prosecute those

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responsible for war crimes, and to provide reparation to victims of violations.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, the UAE's de facto leader, has been [leading considerable efforts](#) to present the UAE as progressive and tolerant, including declaring 2019 as the Year of Tolerance. But he has largely failed to curb human rights abuses in the country.

Domestically, UAE authorities have carried out a [sustained assault](#) on freedom of expression and association since 2011. In 2014, the UAE issued a counterterrorism law that gives authorities the power to prosecute peaceful critics, political dissidents, and human rights activists as terrorists. UAE residents who have spoken about human rights issues are at serious risk of [arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, imprisonment, and torture](#). Many are [serving long prison terms](#) or have left the country under pressure.

In March 2017, the [UAE detained Ahmed Mansoor](#), an award-winning human rights defender, on speech-related charges and held him incommunicado for more than a year. Following a grossly unfair trial, he was sentenced to [10 years in prison](#) on May 29, 2018 for crimes that appear to violate his right to free expression. On December 31, the country's court of last resort in state security cases upheld Ahmed Mansoor's conviction, quashing his final appeal.

UAE courts also imposed a 10-year prison sentence in March 2017 on a prominent academic, [Nasser bin Ghaith](#), whom authorities forcibly disappeared in August 2015, for charges that included peaceful criticism of the UAE and Egyptian authorities.

We urge you to call for the immediate release of Mansoor, bin Ghaith and anyone else detained in the UAE for exercising basic rights such as freedom of speech.

In March, UAE authorities apparently [forcibly returned and then disappeared](#) Sheikha Latifa bint Mohammad al-Maktoum, the 33-year-old daughter of the ruler of Dubai, after she tried to flee the UAE by sea to a third country. She was not seen in public or heard from for over nine months following her disappearance. On December 6, just hours ahead of the airing of a [BBC documentary](#) regarding her forcible return, Dubai's royal court issued a statement claiming Sheikha Latifa was celebrating her birthday privately with her family in Dubai.

On December 24, the UAE's foreign ministry [released photos](#) of Sheikha Latifa with Mary Robinson, a former United Nations high commissioner for human rights and a former president of Ireland, to rebut what they described as "false allegations" that she was taken home against her will. Despite these assurances, it is not clear Sheikha Latifa is not being held against her will. We urge you to press authorities to allow her to independently travel to a secure and neutral location where she can safely speak for herself.

Foreign nationals – many of whom will be attending your open-air mass in Abu Dhabi on February 5 – account for more than 88.5 percent of the UAE's population, according to 2011 government statistics. [Despite some reforms](#), many low-paid migrant workers remain acutely vulnerable to forced labor.

The *kafala* (visa-sponsorship) system ties migrant workers' visas to their employers, and the workers are not allowed to change employers without their employer's consent before the end of their contract. Those who leave without consent [can face punishment](#) for "absconding," including fines, prison, and deportation. A 2017 law [extended key labor protections](#) to domestic workers, but the provisions remain weaker than those in the country's national labor law. Domestic workers [face a range of abuses](#), including long working hours, unpaid salaries, and physical and sexual abuse.

Despite its assertions about tolerance, the UAE government has demonstrated no real interest in improving its human rights record. It has, however, shown how sensitive it is to its image on the global stage. Therefore, we believe strong international pressure that holds it accountable to its rights obligations is necessary.

Should you require any additional information regarding any of the issues we have raised please feel free to contact my colleague Hiba Zayadin at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

Respectfully,

Sarah Leah Whitson  
Executive Director  
Middle East and North Africa  
Human Rights Watch

CC: *Cardinal Pietro Parolin*  
*Vatican Secretary of State*