



Commonwealth of Kentucky

Kentucky Commission on Human Rights

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Press Release

Date: March 21 2017

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Human Rights professionals from the Near East and Africa meet with Kentucky Commission on Human Rights in Louisville

LOUISVILLE, KY- The Kentucky Commission on Human Rights on Tuesday, March 14, was pleased to welcome human and civil rights officials from other nations to its Louisville headquarters. The U.S. Dept. of State requested the meeting for this human and civil rights advocacy group.

The dignitaries asked Kentucky Human Rights Commission Executive Director John J. Johnson and his staff to talk about the mission and work of protecting people in Kentucky from discrimination. The guests said they wanted to learn lessons they can take back to their home countries.

“We were very pleased to visit with these officials from other countries who want to help their people,” said Executive Director Johnson. “There are so many human rights issues throughout the world and our guests came from several countries that have serious human rights issues, according to reports from the media. We hope their visit with us gave them some idea of how we approach those issues in America and in Kentucky,” he said.

The commission was delighted when the visiting officials said their visit to its Louisville headquarters provided them with the best discussion they had experienced since being in America, Executive Director Johnson said.

The commission discussed the history of discrimination and civil rights in the state and explained why the enforcement of civil rights laws like the U.S. and Kentucky Civil Rights acts are vital to peace in society. Commission officials discussed methods used for investigating discrimination complaints and working on cases. They described how the agency works with groups throughout Kentucky to try to empower local citizens to address civil rights issues in their individual communities. The commission discussed how change has occurred and also about current day issues in furthering fair housing, equal employment opportunity, and equality for people with disabilities.

The foreign dignitaries have been meeting with many organizations in America since February through the Dept. of State International Visitor Leadership program. This particular project was provided for people from the Near East and North Africa. They were escorted to the commission by members of the World Affairs Council of Kentucky and Southern Indiana.

The list of visitors:

Imene Benchaouche, of Algeria, directs the activities of Advocacy for Migrants' Rights, a program of Médecins du Monde (Doctors of the World) that focuses on the situation of migrants in Algeria. Since 2014, she has supported the international humanitarian organization as it provides medical care to vulnerable populations affected by war, natural disasters, disease, famine, poverty or exclusion. In Algeria, she is responsible for advocacy and access to rights for sub-Saharan migrants as part of a project operated under the auspices of the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). She helps leaders of Algerian civil society set up an advocacy platform to promote sub-Saharan migrants' access to health care while creating a space for dialogue and exchange between civil society and public authorities.

Abdel Al-Manssour, of Chad, is one of the top prosecutors within the Chadian Ministry of Justice. His scope of duties includes representing the interests of the government in judicial matters and the enforcement of anti-terrorism laws passed after the initial Boko Haram attacks in the capital in 2015. Through his prosecutorial functions, he helps strengthen the rule of law within the Chadian judicial system and effects positive change within his government in keeping with international standards and norms of judicial matters.

Mahmoud Elsherif, of Egypt, is the founder of the Al-Tamayoz Center for In-Depth Legal Studies, a non-governmental organization dedicated to human rights and legal research. Trained as a lawyer, he conducts research into the human rights protections provided under the 2014 Egyptian constitution, particularly with respect to the rights of criminal defendants. His work, taking place in the smaller Nile Delta community of Behira, is emblematic of the need in the many small communities in Egypt which lack the resources available in larger cities like Cairo and Alexandria as citizens seek to obtain transparency and accountability from their government.

Ruqayah Al Khaleefah, of Iraq, is an emerging civil society leader in Basrah, Iraq's second-largest city. She advocates on behalf of divorced and widowed women in both Shia and Sunni communities, and especially in the district's economically vulnerable rural and peri-urban areas. She recently obtained a plot of land on which to establish a women's economic cooperative venture, which will provide widows and other vulnerable women a space in which to launch workshops and other micro-enterprises. One of the goals of this project is to give women options besides being forced to sell their farmland at below-market rates to make ends meet and then face unemployment and a lack of assets. She has also sought to protect the district's historic palm tree farms, a key part of the local traditional economy but threatened by local real estate firms that replace the farms with residential projects. Her work on these and other projects have contributed to the district's economic stability and, as a result, diminish the lure of radical fundamentalism.

Nida Al Shwikh, of Jordan, serves as a volunteer, legal consultant and trainer with the Jordanian National Forum for Women (JNFW) in Aqaba. She is a legal advisor to several Aqaba women's groups, including Sisterhood is Global Institute, and a trainer with Save the Children and Junior Achievement. She is an active proponent of women's full political participation, having trained female candidates in Aqaba for the 2006 municipal elections and the 2010 parliamentary elections. Her own experiences with gender-based discrimination sparked an interest in labor rights activism which led to her publication of SALMA, a manual that educates women about their workplace rights. She is an author of "Me and My Pen," which addresses the difficulties of women and youth. In addition to writing articles for social media and local newspapers, she has written plays to address the issue of violence against women through a comical lens that breaks down social stigmas in a way that is relatable and 'unthreatening' to a conservative society.

Eman Hayat, of Kuwait, has spent much of her professional life in the private sector and has become an advocate for the increased liberalization of Kuwaiti society. She is president of the Kuwait Liberal Movement (KLM). She plans to register KLM as an official NGO, which would be the first liberal rights organization of its kind in Kuwait. She has outlined outreach plans with local schools and universities to begin the dialogue among young people about the importance of tolerance and freedom of belief, in keeping with her own views regarding equal rights for women, freedom of religion, and the vital importance of individual autonomy and human rights. Her 2015 campaign for a seat in the National Assembly, although unsuccessful, earned credit for the courage and resilience she displayed in making a decision outside traditional community and family norms.

Attalah Al-Juaid, of Saudi Arabia, is a journalist and local government official from Taif, a city of more than one million located near Mecca in southwest Saudi Arabia. He is a member of the Taif municipal council, manages the Taif office of Makkah newspaper, owns two online publications (Jeddah Online Newspaper and Taif Online Newspaper), and works on a number of human rights-related projects. Throughout his career, Mr. Al-Juaid has used these platforms to shed light on issues related to freedom, justice, and human rights in Saudi Arabia. During his tenure with Al Watan, his article on inhumane conditions and practices inside a Saudi mental hospital sparked a nationwide response, which led to the improvement of conditions and the increase of regulations on the quality of healthcare and other services provided to the mentally ill. Also while at Al Watan, Mr. Al-Juaid addressed the issue of nepotism by writing a piece in 2006 that exposed blatant cases of nepotism—a problem that threatens citizens' rights to fair consideration when applying for jobs. This article sparked a wide response and led to wide coverage of a variety of nepotism cases throughout the Kingdom.

Alsanousi Ahmed, of Sudan, directs the operations of the Darfur sub-office of NIDAA, a national, non-governmental, development organization that was established in 1998. NIDAA Organization works in the fields of development and capacity-building in the following sectors: food security and livelihood, health, protection, economic recovery, peace building and conflict resolution, and democracy and human rights. As the Darfur office director, he is responsible for coordinating activities with government authorities, staff training, fundraising, performing liaison with funders and served communities, and designing and implementing programs in accordance with the NIDAA Organization mission. His efforts have led to a positive shift in the conservative and protective communities in which the organization operates, which

has resulted in a positive change in the communities' perspectives and attitudes towards gender roles and space that has enabled them to play a positive role in communal peace between conflicting tribes.

Mohaned Ahmed, of Sudan, is a human rights lawyer widely known among the human rights community for his work, which includes contributions to the legal defense teams which represented defendants in several internationally renowned religious freedom cases. In these cases, he worked closely with the lead defense representative, Sudan's most prominent human rights lawyer, Nabil Adeeb. Ahmed is respected for his staunch defense of persecuted religious minorities in Sudan, including evangelical churches, such as Bahri Evangelical Church, which has faced demolition and other harassment by the government. Undeterred by his arrest for his efforts to stop the illegal demolition of the church, he later won his trial and continues steadfastly in his human rights work. He advocates for the rights of women who work in the informal sector selling tea on the roadsides of Khartoum, as well as for women who are fined or lashed due to perceived transgressions of the conservative dress codes.

The Department of State outlined the following specific objectives for the project that brought the visiting officials to the United States and to Louisville last week:

- Examine the historical context of human rights advocacy in the U.S., and the contemporary foreign policy issues resulting from the United Nations' adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*;
- Illustrate the influence of human and civil rights activists on policy at the national, state and local levels through lobbying, media, and grassroots campaigns;
- Explore the role and organizational structure of associations, NGOs, and religious organizations in advancing U.S. civil rights and equal opportunity; and
- Analyze a variety of human rights concerns related to issues including disability rights, freedom of press/speech/religion, access to education, and due process.

The Kentucky Commission on Human Rights is the state authority that enforces the Kentucky Civil Rights Act, which makes discrimination illegal.