



24 March 2022

Dear Max Verstappen,

We, the undersigned human rights organisations, are writing to raise our concerns that Saudi Arabia’s Government will use the upcoming Formula 1 (F1) race in Jeddah on 27 March 2022 to ‘sportswash’ its human rights violations, including the execution of 81 men last week, the largest in its history.

We note the principled stance you have recently taken in relation to the atrocities perpetrated by Russia<sup>1</sup> and we urge you to do the same with respect to atrocities and violations of international law perpetrated by Saudi Arabia.

Your voice can save lives, and empower the individuals and families that are suffering at the hands of the Saudi Arabian authorities. Lewis Hamilton said last week that he needs “allies” to help raise human rights abuses in the Gulf and that he “can’t do it alone”. Lewis Hamilton added that F1 drivers must “continue to use the platforms we have when we arrive in these countries and make sure we are holding serious conversations about what is happening there”.<sup>2</sup>

We urge you to join Lewis Hamilton in raising concerns about human rights violations by Saudi Arabia<sup>3</sup>, as you have in relation to Russia.

Only last week, Saudi Arabia carried out the largest mass execution in the country’s history, executing 81 men in one day. Over 50% of the men were killed for their participation in pro-democracy protests and over 70% were executed for non-lethal offences.

In the two weeks following the mass execution, despite widespread international condemnation<sup>4</sup>, further executions were carried out on a near daily basis – 16 more men were killed.

<sup>1</sup> BBC Sport, Russian Grand Prix cancelled following invasion of Ukraine, 25 February 2022, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/formula1/60523049>

<sup>2</sup> Eurosport, ‘I Can’t Do Everything’ - Mercedes Driver Lewis Hamilton Responds To Bahrain Human Rights Abuses, 18 March 2022, available at: [https://www.eurosport.co.uk/formula-1/i-cant-do-everything-mercedes-driver-lewis-hamilton-responds-to-bahrain-human-rights-abuses\\_sto8849685/story.shtml](https://www.eurosport.co.uk/formula-1/i-cant-do-everything-mercedes-driver-lewis-hamilton-responds-to-bahrain-human-rights-abuses_sto8849685/story.shtml)

<sup>3</sup> Reuters, Hamilton speaks out on human rights ahead of Saudi F1 debut, 3 December 2021, available at: [https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/hamilton-speaks-out-human-rights-ahead-saudi-f1-debut-2021-12-02/#:~:text=Dec%20%20\(Reuters\)%20%2D%20Seven,to%20race%20in%20the%20kingdom.](https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/hamilton-speaks-out-human-rights-ahead-saudi-f1-debut-2021-12-02/#:~:text=Dec%20%20(Reuters)%20%2D%20Seven,to%20race%20in%20the%20kingdom.)

<sup>4</sup> UN News, UN rights chief decries mass execution of 81 people in Saudi Arabia, 14 March 2022, available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113922>



There have already been more executions in the first three months of 2022 than in 2020 and 2021 combined.<sup>5</sup> The current rate of executions suggests that 400 people could be executed by the end of 2022 – more than double the record high number of 186 executions in 2019.

This mass execution marks the third since King Salman ascended to the throne in 2015. The Saudi Arabian authorities repeatedly advertise reforms and a move towards a more progressive society, however, these are empty promises. The human rights situation in Saudi Arabia has been getting progressively worse, and they continue to act with impunity.

Saudi Arabia, in clear violation of its international law obligations, still applies the death penalty for child defendants and systematically uses torture to extract false confessions .

With the major escalation in the Kingdom’s use of the death penalty, we fear for the lives of the many individuals currently on death row. Unfortunately, due to the Kingdom’s lack of transparency, we do not know exactly how many people are at risk of execution in Saudi Arabia.

It could be thousands of people. We know it includes pro-democracy protesters, plus child defendants such as Abdullah al-Howaiti<sup>6</sup>, who was only 14 years old when he was arrested for a crime he could not have committed. CCTV footage, confirmed by court documents, shows he was 200km away from the scene of the crime. He was held incommunicado for several months and tortured until he signed a false ‘confession’.

We know that you do not have a choice about where the race is held. However, you can make a real difference by joining Lewis Hamilton to use your platform when visiting Saudi Arabia to urge that the lives of people like Abdullah be spared.

Please would you echo Lewis Hamilton’s concerns about human rights abuses in the country and express solidarity with victims of torture and the death penalty, including pro-democracy protesters and child defendants when you visit Saudi Arabia?

As Lewis Hamilton has said, he needs allies. With your platform as an F1 driver, you can be a real voice for change and help save the lives of people like Abdullah.

<sup>5</sup> Reprieve and ESOHR’s monitoring shows that there were 27 executions in 2020 and 69 in 2021.

<sup>6</sup> BBC News, Abdullah al-Howaiti: Saudi child 'offender' sentenced to death at retrial, 3 March 2022, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-60603447>



We would be grateful for your solidarity with the victims of these atrocities.

Cordially submitted,

Reprieve

European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (ESOHR)

Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD)

World Coalition against the Death Penalty

Ensemble contre la peine de mort (ECPM)

European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (ECDHR)

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)

ALQST for Human Rights

MENA Rights Group

Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN)