

15 September 2020

Iraq: Trial of 'Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq' resumes

On 17 September 2020, the third hearing in the trial of the **Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq** is scheduled to take place at the Karada Court of First Instance in Baghdad. The organisation is facing dissolution on charges of "incitement to debauchery and immorality" and "receiving funds from suspicious organisations".

The Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) is a human rights organisation that works on empowering and protecting women and LGBTI persons who face violence or find themselves in situations of risk. It operates shelters in a number of Iraqi cities for victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence as well as vulnerable minorities.

After attending initial hearings on 22 January and 2 March 2020, lawyers for OWFI have been summonsed to the third public hearing on the request to ban the organisation. On 9 January 2020, the former Secretary General of the Iraqi Council of Ministers submitted a request to the Karada Court of First Instance to withdraw Government authorisation for OWFI and dissolve the organisation. It alleged that the OWFI violated 'the Law on Non-Governmental Organisations' (Law No. 12 of 2010). The organisation is accused of "incitement to debauchery and immorality" and "receiving funds from suspicious organisations". It also faces accusations of engaging in political activities following the participation of some of its members in peaceful demonstrations that have been taking place in Baghdad since October 2019.

Human rights defenders working for the organisation have been increasingly harassed in recent months. Since the beginning of the October protests, several of them have received messages by phone and on social media with serious threats, including that of abduction or killing, for carrying out their human rights activities.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the judicial harassment and potential closure of OWFI as well as the serious threats received by its members. Front Line Defenders believes that the organisation is being targetted solely for its work defending the rights of vulnerable groups in Iraq.

Front Line Defenders urge the Iraqi Authorities to:

1. Immediately drop all charges against the OWFI as it is believed that they are solely motivated by the organisation's legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the threats against the organisation members, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in Iraq and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.