

Pegasus and Other Spyware Threatens UN Human Rights Work, Guterres Warns

United Nations secretary-general says digital surveillance has stopped human rights defenders from submitting information and made them more vulnerable to reprisal

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Antonio Guterres, the United Nations secretary-general, has warned of the serious threat spyware programmes like Pegasus pose to the UN’s work on human rights in [a damning report](#) set to be debated next week.

Expanding digital surveillance by states and non-state actors has impacted the ability of civil society actors to submit information to the UN and has made them more vulnerable to intimidation and reprisal, Guterres cautions.

“United Nations actors have pointed to growing and concerning evidence of online surveillance, privacy intrusion, and cyberattacks by state and non-state actors of victims and civil society communications and activities,” the UN chief writes.

“The lack of trust in the digital sphere among those sharing information and testimony with the United Nations on sensitive issues can discourage future cooperation.”

His findings are part of an annual report that monitors the challenges faced by those seeking to cooperate with the organisation and focuses on April 2021 to May 2022.

During this period, much of the UN’s work was conducted digitally in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, making threats of surveillance and spyware especially concerning.

In particular, he singles out the potential repercussions that Pegasus, the military-grade spyware made by the Israel-based NSO Group, has had for Palestinian, Bahraini, and Moroccan organisations and human rights defenders who have cooperated with the UN.

He notes that staff at three prominent Palestinian NGOs – Addameer, Al-Haq, and Bisan

Center for Research and Development – were surveilled and had their phones hacked with Pegasus in 2021. The hacking [came two weeks](#) after the Israeli government had designated the organisations and three others as “terrorist associations”.

Israel did not respond to the allegations highlighted in the report.

Repercussions for cooperating with UN

In Bahrain, the report highlights two human rights defenders, Ebtisam al-Saegh and Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei, in relation to spyware.

This January, investigators [found](#) that al-Saegh’s mobile phone had been hacked at least eight times between August and November 2019 with Pegasus. Alwadaei’s mobile number was discovered [on a leaked list of numbers](#) identified as targets by NSO Group’s government clients between 2017 and 2019.

Both have allegedly experienced earlier repercussions for their cooperation with the UN, Guterres notes.

As Middle East Eye has [previously reported](#), al-Saegh, who is based in Bahrain, was detained in March 2017 for seven hours at Bahrain International Airport on her return from the UN Human Rights Council, where she spoke out about violations in the kingdom.

She was interrogated for five hours and had her passport and mobile phone confiscated.

A couple of months later, interrogators from Bahrain’s National Security Agency [abused her physically and verbally](#), and sexually assaulted her at Muharraq police station. She was told that if she did not cease her activism she would be raped.

“As someone who has been unable to heal from the torture and sexual assault experienced by Bahraini security due to the culture of impunity that allows my abusers to walk free, I feel deep pain in knowing that malicious spyware has now been used against me,” al-Saegh told MEE.

Alwadaei, director of advocacy for the UK-based Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (Bird), who lives in exile in London, and several of his relatives have faced reprisal, including arbitrary arrest and removal of citizenship, as a result of his continuous engagement with the UN, Guterres notes.

The Bahraini government, in response to the report, said that neither al-Saegh, nor Alwadaei and his family had been targeted because of their human rights activity or cooperation with the UN, but did not respond to the spyware allegations.

In Morocco, Guterres reports on the case of veteran [Sahrawi](#) human rights defender [Aminatou Haidar](#), who has allegedly faced threats, physical attacks, constant police monitoring, legal action, and online surveillance for her ongoing cooperation with the UN.

In March 2022, forensic evidence from an investigation reportedly showed that Haidar’s mobile phones were targeted and intercepted by Pegasus in October and November 2021.

“I also blame the NSO Group, which I consider to be a company that profits from human

rights violations with espionage technology provided to authoritarian countries such as Morocco,” Haidar told MEE in March.

Guterres also writes that the UN received information that Claude Mangin-Asfari, the wife of imprisoned Sahrawi human rights defender Ennaama Asfari, and her husband’s lawyer were targeted with Pegasus in 2021.

‘The price human rights defenders pay’

In a response to the report’s allegations, Moroccan authorities categorically denied that Haidar, Mangin-Asfari, or her husband’s lawyer were hacked with Pegasus, and also said that they categorically rejected that Haidar had been subject to constant police surveillance or physical violence during the reporting period.

Alwadaei said the report reveals “the price human rights defenders pay for cooperating with the UN” and the extent to which repressive governments will go to intimidate activists.

“This important recognition by the UN secretary-general on governments’ misuse of Pegasus spyware is an important step. The UN should follow up by calling for greater scrutiny of surveillance technology and its misuse by states, coupled with improved regulation,” he said.

“As someone named in this report who has been targeted by the Bahraini government, the state’s response fails to even acknowledge their use of surveillance technology against human rights activists. This should not go unchallenged by the UN.”

The report is scheduled to be debated on 29 September at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

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