SPECIAL PROCEDURES
UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

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Preliminary observations
Cairo, Egypt, 17 February 2026

Dear journalists,
Dear representatives of media outlets,

I would like to begin by thanking the Government of Egypt for inviting me to visit the country from 8 to 17 February 2026 to assess, in a spirit of cooperation, the realization of the right to safe drinking water and sanitation in the country, including challenges and good practices. I also would like to thank them for their hospitality. I am an independent expert who reports to, and advises, the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly. This is the second visit undertaken by my mandate to Egypt and the first by a Special Procedures mandate holder, since 2018. I wish to take this opportunity to congratulate Egypt, as a newly elected member of the Human Rights Council and I hope that it will pursue its collaboration with Special Procedures by inviting other mandates to visit the country.

During my visit, I met with Government officials. I also met with representatives of international organizations, civil society actors – in person and online –, representatives of water and irrigation associations, and visited different projects in Cairo, as well as Kafr Elsheikh, Fayoum, Aswan and Qena Governorates.

I am grateful to all stakeholders who interacted with me and those who took the time to meet with me and share their experiences, which helped me to learn more about the challenges and good practices in the country. I also underscore the rights of right holders to engage with my mandate without reprisals.

After ten days of visiting the country, I have gathered information, which will help me assess the realization of the right safe drinking water and sanitation in Egypt. Today, I will present some of my preliminary observations, which will be elaborated in more detail in a report that will be presented to the Human Rights Council next September.

Egypt is a large country with an ancient culture and a population of 116.5 million, which depends mainly on the Nile River for its supply of fresh water. The desert, which comprises the majority of the country, experiences hardly any rainfall, while the Mediterranean coastal strip receives extremely variable rainfall. In this territorial context, the Nile River and the Delta form the backbone of the growing population. Around 57 per cent of the population lives in rural areas, while 43 per cent in cities, notably Cairo, with 23.5 million inhabitants. In 2017, the World Bank estimated that 32.5 per cent of the population lived below the poverty line, a figure that has further increased since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conflicts in neighboring and nearby countries generate a significant demographic challenge, as people flying conflict, among them asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants are estimated to be around 10 million people in Egypt.

Legal and institutional framework for water management

While the Constitution stipulates the right to access water suitable for consumption, I noticed that the human rights to drinking water and sanitation are not clearly recognized. The 2021-2026 National Human Rights Strategy aimed at strengthening legal and institutional frameworks is an important step towards the advancement of the right to safe water and sanitation. Domestic laws establish and develop a

regulatory framework for the management of water resources in the country, the control of drinking water quality, and the regulation of sanitation services, including technical and health standards, among others. The Strategic Water Management Plan (2017-2037) is an important step to advance towards the achievement of SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation and address water security, waste reduction, and improve service quality, which counts on a powerful equipped infrastructure, significant resources and technical capabilities.

While recognizing these positive developments and seeing the projects developed with the support of both the international community and multilateral financial institutions, I would like to express concern about pressures from the latter to privatize and impose conditions on loans. On another point, Law No. 172/2025 establishes a regulatory framework that opens business opportunities for the private sector, starting with the construction and operation of desalination plants and sanitation plants, possibly paving the way for the privatization of water and sanitation services management under the public-private partnership strategy and could generate risks for those living in poverty and vulnerability.

The institutional framework for water management – whose priority mainly focuses on water management for irrigation – is centralized in several ministries, which oversee various entities, such as the Water and Sanitation Holding Company, under the Ministry of Housing, Public Services, and Urban Communities, which manages water and sanitation services throughout the country.

This institutional and bureaucratic complexity could often lead to serious inefficiencies, overlapping competences, and areas with diffuse or indeterminate responsibilities. Although management is decentralized through public companies in each Governorate, they all depend on the central Holding Company. Given this institutional framework, I have expressed concerns about the marginalization of local governments. Municipalities, which are State institutions at the local level can have more experience with the challenges faced on the ground by the population, including marginalized people. The latter should play a vital role, as otherwise it may hinder the participation of right-holders and the affected population in the management of vital services, such as water and sanitation.

Taking into account the challenges of climate change, I would like to stress the importance of ensuring the priority of restoring and conserving the good condition of aquatic ecosystems and effective access to drinking water and sanitation for the entire population. This should be at the forefront of the institutional structure, as the basis for healthy and sustainable development, in which irrigation undoubtedly has a fundamental role to play.

Availability of fresh water and main uses

95 per cent of available water comes from the Nile, both surface water and underground water, from the renewable aquifers fed by the river, mostly in the Delta, used mainly for irrigation, as well as for urban demand (14 per cent).

Since particular attention of my visit was devoted to the compliance of the human rights to drinking water and sanitation, and using the 50 litres per person per day as

the minimum reference established by the UN to comply with this human rights obligation, which represents two per cent of the country's current total water demand. In this regard, I encourage the Government to apply the principle of priority of the use of water rather than justifying the current challenges faced in the availability of drinking water on scarcity in guaranteeing such rights.

Risks to available freshwater sources

The main impacts, reducing the availability of water of adequate quality for human consumption, stem from various causes linked to: 1) pollution; 2) climate change; 3) the management of the transboundary Nile basin; 4) the overexploitation of aquifers; and 5) the development of new irrigation systems in the desert, using water from the Nile.

Polluting discharges and diffuse agricultural pollution

Throughout my visit, Government representatives at different levels insisted that the water is, in general, free of pollution and subjected to monitoring through systematic analysis, specifying that 13 million samples are analyzed each year in independent laboratories. In addition, I was informed that the results are unfortunately not made public, for two main reasons: the reported complexity for the general public understanding and national security reasons. While taking note of these arguments, I would rather like to encourage the State to provide free access to data, as a matter of public transparency, to ensure a public and constructive debate on such vital issues. I also wish to raise concerns about information received on cases of alleged persecution of people who expressed disagreement about official information. This concern is heightened by the reported criminalization of spreading “rumors”, or fake news about water pollution problems. This legal measure clearly threatens independent investigation and stifles public debate on such an important issue. On this, I also noticed the fear of few people in sharing specific data with me. I wish to underscore that the lack of transparency can undermine credibility and fuel social mistrust. In order to continue advancing on the right to safe drinking water and sanitation to all, including marginalized groups of the population, an open civic space, allowing all stakeholders to express their views free from any type of possible intimidation, persecution or detention is key.

According to the data collected in the context of my visit and the information received, massive and systematic industrial discharges without treatment are reportedly taking place, with highly dangerous contributions of toxic substances, including from the country's leading companies. On the other hand, most agricultural drainage, containing nutrients and agrochemical pollutants, also ends up in the Nile and its aquifers. The organic and nutrient load recorded in Aswan, for example, is reportedly multiplied by 15 in the Delta, causing serious eutrophication problems, while the concentration of heavy metals is reportedly multiplied by almost 20, leading to toxic risks that water treatment plants are generally unable to purify. I am deeply concerned that the areas with a major population concentration, including Cairo and the Delta area, could receive the impact of accumulated contamination throughout the Nile.

In addition, the massive use of fertilizers triggers nitrogen and phosphorus pollution and generates eutrophication processes that destroy aquatic life, leading to toxic cyanobacterial contamination. The removal of macrophytes from riverbeds using

heavy machinery, presented as an example of restoring these waterways to good condition, is in my opinion, a measure that does not solve the root of the problem.

Drinking water and sanitation services

Egypt made significant efforts to develop public water and sanitation services. However, deep inequalities, with more than 30 per cent of the population living in poverty, hamper the management of drinking water and sanitation services, creating significant inequities in accessing such services. Throughout my visit, I have tried to focus on marginalized groups of the population, including those living in poverty rural areas, fishing communities, those living in slums, and those who have fled conflict.

I also pay special attention to the role of women in water management. I have received valuable contributions from women who are at the forefront of water management responsibilities, a positive sign of the Government's willingness to promote equal participation of women in decision-making. However, I noticed a low proportion of women at the various meetings held and I encourage the Government to pursue its efforts in achieving equal participation of women in these crucial issues.

Regarding people fleeing conflicts in the region, as there are no refugee camps in the country, I have been unable to gather reliable information on the water, sanitation, and hygiene services available to them. However, it seems that many often arrive without any documentation identity and tend to live in impoverished settlements in large cities, particularly Cairo, in extremely precarious conditions that might not guarantee their human rights to WASH standards.

The Government proudly informed about important urban investments in new cities. However, the Code No.102/1 of May 2010, establishes very unequal supply levels: ranging from 100-150 l/person/day in villages, to 280-320 l/person/day in New Cities and 350-400 l/person/day in touristic areas. While noting the challenges faced by the country in terms of demographic growth, I am concerned about reports received on the fact that infrastructure investment in villages and marginalized areas still remain slow and insufficient. In this sense, the ostentatious development of the new cities – reportedly affordable only to the wealthiest – reveals a worrying lack of equitable social criteria in the priorities of public budgets and investments to be developed, which are reflected in water and sanitation services. The new urban development comprising, reportedly concentrates eight per cent of the population, which consumes 23 per cent of drinking water, while dependence on often unsafe sources remains a source of concern in many impoverished rural areas. In this regard, according to information received, new cities in Giza allegedly receive 2.5 times more water per capita than Meet Rahina, where 20 per cent of residents remain allegedly disconnected from the network.

Beyond the unequal distribution of drinking water per person in the different governorates, in rural areas, in cities and, above all, in new cities, it is often the lack of infrastructure, low water pressure, poor condition of the networks, and water cuts especially in summer, that cause serious problems affecting many people in situation of poverty in rural areas and peripheral urban settlements about which I have received information. In many other cases, even though it is physically possible to connect to the supply network, people cannot cover the cost demanded by the water

company to make the connection. I have visited a project that tried to respond to these challenges, launched by UNICEF, in collaboration with the Holding Company for Water and Wastewater, which finances 60 per cent of the cost of the connection to tap water, while families pay 40 per cent through a loan. The subsequent progressive payments made by them are accumulated in a fund used to finance the project in other communities and called Revolving Fund Mechanism strategy.

I wish to also acknowledge the importance of the Presidential Initiative launched to develop rural villages in Egypt, titled "A Decent Life." This project is set to be implemented in three phases. The first phase implemented by the Government includes 1,814 drinking water and sanitation projects. This is leading to, and may lead to, interesting progress in expanding drinking water and sanitation networks in many regions.

While being pleased to see such type of initiatives, I remain concerned that seven per cent of the total population in Egypt reportedly still do not have water taps inside their homes.

In any case, I understand that the main problems, especially for those living in poverty, lie in potability of tap water, emphasized during some official meetings held. I have been offered tap water rather than bottled water in many of them, which I have gratefully accepted. But, on the other hand, other sources indicated that they do not drink tap water at home, except those who can afford it and install machines to filter it, leaving behind people in situations of poverty.

In addition, I remain concerned about the fact that the toxic discharges mentioned earlier might affect the potability of the water that cannot be detected by taste, smell, or immediate health problems. In this regard, the lack of public transparency emphasized earlier regarding the results of the control analyses creates a further concern.

I welcome the tiered pricing system, with low costs for basic consumption of drinking water. However, for those living in extreme poverty, for whom the cost of connection or payment of the tariff is a major problem, free connection and access to a basic supply that guarantees the human right to safe drinking water should be established as the norm. Finally, on this point, I wish to reiterate my particular concern about the possible evolution of the tariff system, under the pressure to privatize these services promoted by the new law passed in 2025.

I noticed that data on losses in supply networks vary according to different sources consulted. According to the Government, losses average less than 30 per cent while other sources put them at between 30 and per cent, or even higher.

Irrigation Water

Although my report is meant to focus on water and sanitation services, I have visited irrigation projects with great interest.

The Water Resources and Irrigation Act No. 147 of 2021, among other objectives, regulates the organization of farmers into user associations, creating a very

interesting representative structure. Starting with grassroot elections, based on the principle of "one irrigator, one vote," the structure culminates in the National Council. I strongly wish to see a similar representative organization for drinking water and sanitation users, in which municipalities should play a significant role.

I was informed that farmers do not pay for irrigation services, which, while positive from a social perspective for small-scale traditional farmers, I understand would be, at the very least, debatable in the new desert irrigation systems for large agricultural exporters. These systems also require enormous investments, generate serious environmental risks, and divert large volumes of water needed for existing irrigation systems and for the sustainability of the delta in the face of current climate change prospects.

The development of new irrigation systems in the desert for agricultural exports using water from the Nile

In a context characterized by severe water scarcity, particularly in terms of Nile flows, it is contradictory, to say the least, to promote new irrigation systems in the desert by diverting significant flows from the Delta, which should be prioritized to protect existing irrigation systems and the sustainability of the Delta under the current prospects for climate change and sea level rise.

Such irrigation, on the other hand, largely dedicated to large agro-export farms, which are intensive in irrigation even with modern technologies, generates the serious contradiction of exporting billions of cubic meters of virtual water (used in the production of these exports) from desert areas. If these new desert irrigation systems were to be extended to the projected 1.6 million hectares, this would dramatically accelerate the salinization of the Delta and its aquifers.

Impacts and risks arising from climate change

Global warming increases the variability of rainfall, multiplying the risk of droughts and floods and reducing the proportion of water that replenishes aquifers; but also imposes greater evapotranspiration on plants, thus increasing the amount of irrigation water needed. However, in my opinion, the main risks are concentrated in the Delta, due to the progressive salinization of its aquifers caused by seawater intrusion as sea levels rise.

On the other hand, the growing scarcity of river sediments, which collapse in large reservoirs upstream, generates a subsidence process (sinking due to sediment compaction) that, combined with rising sea levels, will cause the progressive flooding of large areas of the delta.

I visited an interesting coastal defense project, in response to increasingly aggressive storm surges, as a result of the collaboration between the Government and UNDP. The project involves planting a structure of cane fences, built by women, which retain the sand, forming a large longitudinal dune that protects homes, properties and facilities.

Transboundary management of the Nile Basin and shared aquifers
The UN *Water Convention* insists on the vital urgency of developing negotiations between countries that share basins and aquifers to promote an ecosystem approach that allows managing the risks of droughts and extraordinary floods, exacerbated by climate change, as well as promoting sustainable and equitable management of the river ecosystem for the benefit of all. Just as hurricanes and storms do not recognize national sovereignty, rivers do not recognize borders when it comes to the risks of drought and flooding. I encourage all countries in the Nile Basin to sign and implement the UN Water Convention. Similarly, I encourage the countries that share the fossil aquifers of the Sahara Desert to sign and implement this *Convention*, as these aquifers are highly vulnerable and at the same time vital for the populations that depend on the oases in the region

The overexploitation of aquifers
Aquifers around the world not only store and manage thirty times more water than we see in surface water ecosystems (rivers, lakes, wetlands), but they also protect the quality of their water from potential spills, distribute these flows over large areas without the need for costly distribution networks, and are strategic reserves for managing droughts. However, the profitability of pumping underground water for productive use carries risks of overexploitation and pollution that must be managed if we want to preserve the treasure that these aquifers represent under the prospects imposed by climate change.

In this regard, I would like to respectfully recommend addressing the proliferation of unlicensed wells and uncontrolled pumping in certain areas to prevent overexploitation. Similarly, it is essential to protect the quality of groundwater by reducing diffuse pollution from industrial fertilizers and agrochemicals through the development of appropriate public policies. Furthermore, ensuring that sufficient flows reach the Delta, including drainage flows, helps to curb the salinization of the delta and its aquifers and preserve its sustainability.

Finally, the intensive exploitation of fossil aquifers in the desert by large agro-export producers not only promotes an ephemeral economy but also puts at risk the livelihoods of communities that depend on these aquifers in oases.

The challenge of promoting a human rights-based approach to management
More than two billion people worldwide do not have guaranteed access to safe drinking water, most of them people in situation of poverty, living alongside rivers or on top of contaminated aquifers, or whose water is monopolized by powerful actors for their economic activities. In this global context, I wish to insist on the need to promote governance that establishes ethical priorities. The highest priority must be given to water for life, guaranteeing human rights and the sustainability of ecosystems. At a second level, water for the common good in uses and functions of general interest to society. And at a third level, water for economic development that goes beyond the basic needs.

The challenge of guaranteeing the human rights to drinking water and sanitation in Egypt, in quantitative terms, requires only two per cent of the water extracted from the Nile and its aquifers. I would like to stress the importance of making it a national priority in budget allocation, to sustain the investments needed by the populations in situations of poverty and more marginalized.

On the other hand, if we refer to the pollution problems highlighted earlier, the challenge lies in the implementation of the existing legislation by developing the Polluter Pays Principle. But, beyond this principle, as a pillar of the United Nations, it is a question of promoting a human rights-based approach to water management, ensuring transparency, public accountability, and broad participation.

During my visit, Government representatives demonstrated an openness to inputs and discussions, and I remain committed to working with them to provide technical assistance after my visit.

These are my preliminary observations. I will go into more detail in a full report, including my findings and recommendations. This report will be presented to the UN Human Rights Council next September in Geneva.

Thank you.