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Public Statement

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Saudi Arabia: Juvenile offender beheaded

Amnesty International is outraged at the recent beheading of a child offender in Saudi Arabia. According to press reports, the execution took place in the city of Taif on 21 July 2007.

Dhahian Rakan al-Sibai'i was sentenced to death for a murder he allegedly committed when he was just 15 years old. He was held in a juvenile facility until his 18th birthday and then moved to an adult prison. Dhahian appealed to the families of the victim to pardon him -- as allowed by Shari'a law -- but the outcome of his appeal is not known.

In May 2007, Amnesty International issued urgent appeals to the government of Saudi Arabia calling for a halt to his execution and urging commutation of the death sentence against him

The organisation calls upon King Abdullah to immediately halt all pending executions and take all necessary steps to stop the imposition of death sentences on juvenile offenders.

Due to the strict secrecy of the criminal justice system, it is not possible to know how many juvenile offenders have been put to death in Saudi Arabia, but according to a media report, over 100 juvenile offenders are said to be on death row. They include Rizana Nafeek, a Sri Lankan national who was 17 at the time of the alleged murder for which she was sentenced to death following her arrest in 2005. They may also include Sultan Kohail, a 16-year-old Canadian national who was tried early this year on murder charges along with his brother Mohamed Kohail, aged 22.

Dhahian Rakan al-Sibai'i's beheading is one of the latest in a recent spate of executions in Saudi Arabia. Since September 2006, at least 143 men and women have been executed in the Kingdom, which is one of the highest execution rates in the world.

Trial proceedings usually take place behind closed doors without adequate legal representation, and invariably fall short of international fair trial standards. Both children and adults are often convicted on the basis of "confessions" obtained under duress, including torture or other ill-treatment during incommunicado detention.

Background

International law prohibits Saudi Arabia from executing people for crimes committed when they are below the age of 18. Saudi Arabian officials have maintained that they comply with this obligation, contained in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, because they do not execute children. In fact, the convention prohibits executions for crimes committed while a person is a child, regardless of when the sentence is carried out.