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Saudi Arabia: Release women protesters

Three women still detained following protests in Saudi Arabia on Saturday 9 February should be released immediately and unconditionally, Amnesty International said today.

The protests were held in Riyadh and Buraida, a city north of the capital, to call for the release of relatives detained without charge or trial or held beyond the expiry of their sentences.

Around a dozen women and five children protested outside the Riyadh offices of Saudi Arabia's National Society for Human Rights, a human rights body set up by the authorities in 2004, after they attempted to meet with officials in the office but were told they were not available.

Women protesters told Amnesty International that they were surrounded by police cars after they took out their placards to protest. Buses were brought into the area, and a total of 25 police cars surrounded the area. Some of the women were reportedly beaten and their placards taken by force. One woman fell in a nearby hole in the ground as a result of the attack. A 12-year-old boy, whose father has been detained without charge or trial for 10 years, was beaten and had the placards he was carrying taken from him by force.

Fatima al-Misnid, daughter of Bahia al-Rashudi, who continues to be detained at al-Malaz prison in Riyadh, told Amnesty that about 10 female guards surrounded her and beat her until she fell on the floor before being dragged onto the bus.

Around 13 individuals were arrested and taken to the General Directorate of Investigation at around 3pm and interrogated three times without a lawyer present. They were asked about who they were, who was leading their group, how they co-ordinated their activities and if they had Twitter accounts. One woman was reportedly asked by an official if she knew that protests were forbidden under Shari'a (Islamic law), to which she responded there are different opinions on this.

The women and children were apparently not provided with food until around midnight after the women had pleaded with officials on behalf of their children. Later that night, at around 1.30am, some of the women and all of the children were released.

Three women continue to be detained in al-Malaz prison and reportedly have no access to their families; they are expected to be referred to court. Apart from Bahia al-Rashudi, the daughter of 76-year-old prominent reformist Dr Suliaman al-Rushudi, those detained are Hanan al-'Amereeni and Hameeda al-Ghamidi. Amnesty International considers these women to be detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression and assembly and therefore prisoners of conscience; the organization calls for their immediate and unconditional release.

Dr Suliaman al-Rashudi was arrested on 12 December, two days after he had given a lecture in an informal social gathering on the legality of holding demonstrations in Shari'a. He is one of 16 men who were found guilty in November 2011 on a range of serious charges related to their peaceful human rights activism and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. In January 2013 the men were offered a royal "pardon" if they signed a pledge to not repeat their offences or

engage in public activism and thank the King. Dr al-Rashudi and six others refused to sign such a pledge and consequently continue to be detained. Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience and has called for their immediate and unconditional release.

The protest organized on 9 February in Buraida was held outside the Board of Grievances, an administrative court with jurisdiction to consider complaints against the state and its public services. At least 15 women and 10 children were reported to have been arrested by the police. Most were taken to the main police station in Buraida, but some of those under the age of 30 were taken to the girls' section in the Social Welfare Home; at the end of the day they were all transferred to the General Prison in Buraida. All of the women and children were released without charge at around 11.30pm on 11 February.

Background information

Protests are banned in the Kingdom but since 2011 protests have been held by relatives of those held without charge or trial with increasing frequency in towns and cities around the country. In the Eastern Province, where the majority of demonstrations have taken place, protests have also focussed on perceived discrimination against the country's Shi'a minority, most of whom reside in that region.

On 5 January 2013 security forces arrested some 18 women and 10 children who had gathered outside Buraida's Board of Grievances building to protest at the continued detention of relatives in connection with the Saudi Arabian authorities' counter-terrorism efforts. While seven women and all of the children were released, three of the women were transferred to Buraida's General Prison and eight others – all of them under the age of 30 – were transferred to the Social Welfare Home in the capital Riyadh, some 350km away. The three women held in Buraida were taken to court on 9 January and questioned without a lawyer present about, among other things, why they had protested. They refused to sign a pledge that they would not protest again and were sentenced to five days in prison for participating in the demonstration, following which they were released. The remaining eight women were released several days later.

Criticism of the state is generally not tolerated in Saudi Arabia. Those who do criticize the government, their policies or practices are often held incommunicado without charge, sometimes in solitary confinement, and denied access to lawyers or the courts to challenge the lawfulness of their detention. Torture or other ill-treatment is frequently used to extract "confessions" from detainees, to punish them for refusing to "repent" or to force them to make undertakings not to criticize the government. Incommunicado detention often lasts until a "confession" is obtained, which can take months and occasionally years.

If a person is charged, it is sometimes with vague security-related offences such as "disobeying the ruler". Legal proceedings fall far short of international standards for fair trial; defendants are generally denied legal counsel, and in many cases, they and their families are not informed of the progress of legal proceedings against them. Court hearings are often held behind closed doors.