

0001 hrs gmt Tuesday 14 September 1993

**SAUDI ARABIA: CHRISTIANS AND SHI'A MUSLIMS SUFFER PERSECUTION**

Persecution of religious minorities has increased dramatically in Saudi Arabia since the Gulf Crisis in 1990. Shi'a Muslims have long been victimized and scores continue to face long periods of detention, torture and even death. There has also been a marked increase in arrests of Christians over the past three years - hundreds of Christian men, women and children have been arrested and ill-treated by the religious police, most without charge or trial, often leading to deportation.

"Shi'a Muslims and Christians are forced to worship in secret, in terror of religious police who are given free rein to raid private homes and arrest those caught praying or in possession of rosaries, the turba (Shi'a prayer stone), pictures of Jesus Christ, or Shi'a or Christian religious literature," said Amnesty International.

The vast majority of Saudi Arabian citizens are Sunni Muslims and the official creed of the state is the Wahabi doctrine of Islam. Public and private non-Muslim religious worship is banned in Saudi Arabia and there are no public places of worship for non-Muslims in the country.

The force of religious intolerance in the country is not limited to non-Muslims: Shi'a Islam is seen as incompatible with Wahabi Islam and officially sanctioned discrimination against Saudi Arabian Shi'a Muslims - up to 10 per cent of the population - has resulted in practising Shi'a Muslims being seen as political dissidents. Shi'a Muslims have even been convicted of apostasy - renouncing Islam - and sentenced after unfair trials to death.

In September 1992, Sadiq 'Abdul-Karim Malallah, a Shi'a Muslim, was publicly beheaded in al'Qatif after being convicted of apostasy and blasphemy in a grossly unfair trial. At his trial in July 1988, he was asked to convert to Wahabism, but he refused. Amnesty International believes Sadiq Malallah was executed because of his involvement in efforts to secure the right of Saudi Arabia's Shi'a Muslim minority to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

The Christian community, predominantly expatriate workers on short-term residencies, has tended to form private fellowships. Christians who participate in these fellowships have told Amnesty International that their secret prayer and Bible study meetings are frequently broken up by religious police and those present arrested.

There appears to be further discrimination in the pattern of arrest on the basis of nationality: Of 329 Christian worshippers known to have been arrested since August 1990, 325 were nationals of developing countries, while only four were from Western Europe and North America.

Amnesty International has repeatedly raised the cases of detained Christians and Shi'a Muslims with the Saudi Arabian authorities, but has received no response. Despite the recent release of 21 Shi'a Muslims, nothing concrete has been done to protect them from future victimization.

In a report issued today Amnesty International has urged the Saudi Arabian Government to enact new laws to combat religious persecution and to demonstrate commitment to international human rights standards guaranteeing people's right to freedom of thought,

conscience and religion. The organization is also calling for safeguards to be implemented to protect detainees from torture and ill-treatment, which should be prohibited explicitly by law.

Said Amnesty International: "Religious intolerance is deep rooted in Saudi Arabia and the government must take a strong stand to show that the pattern of arbitrary arrest, detention and torture must stop."

**EMBARGOED FOR 0001 HRS GMT, TUESDAY 14 SEPTEMBER 1993**