

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Imprisonment and Flogging for Marriage Across Faiths: The Case of Elie Dib Ghaleb

Elie Dib Ghaleb, a 30 year-old Christian Lebanese national has been sentenced to 39 lashes and one year's imprisonment reportedly solely for having married Mona, a Muslim woman from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). His ordeal began on 5 December 1995 when police went to the Intercontinental Hotel in al-'Ain in Abu Dhabi, where he worked as a restaurant manager, took him to his residence and searched for his marriage certificate. When they found it they arrested him. He was detained until 29 October 1996 when a *Shari'a* court in al-'Ain tried and sentenced him allegedly solely because of his marriage, as a Christian, to Mona.

Elie Dib Ghaleb has been working in the UAE, where he met Mona, since 1988. In June 1995 they were married in Lebanon. Subsequently, Elie Dib Ghaleb went back to his work in the UAE, while Mona returned to the United States of America to complete her business studies at Francis Marion University in Florence, South California.

Elie Dib Ghaleb is reported to have been beaten a number of times since his arrest. He is also alleged to have been flogged many times after investigation with him by police in al-'Ain. He is said to be suffering from high blood pressure, for which he was hospitalized twice for treatment.

Under *Shari'a* (Islamic) law, in force in the UAE, a Muslim woman is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim man unless he converts to Islam. Such marriage under *Shari'a* in the UAE is considered null and void, and the parties may be subject to punishment such as imprisonment or flogging for fornication.

In April 1996 Amnesty International wrote to the UAE authorities expressing concern at the detention of Elie Dib Ghaleb and seeking clarification as to the exact reason for his arrest and detention. To date, no response has been received. The organization issued urgent appeals calling on the UAE authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Elie Dib Ghaleb, as he has been imprisoned solely on religious grounds, and commute the sentence of flogging. The authorities have not officially responded and the case was reportedly referred to the office of the UAE President, Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, for a final decision. Some reports suggest that Elie Dib Ghaleb expressed his intent to convert to Islam and such a measure would save him from the punishment to which he has been sentenced.

Amnesty International considers that the imprisonment and the sentence of flogging passed on Elie Dib Ghaleb for having married Mona to be a grave violation of his right freely to hold and express his beliefs and to be free from discrimination by reason of religion. Amnesty International considers him to be a prisoner of conscience imprisoned solely on religious grounds and has been calling for his immediate and unconditional release. Elie Dib Ghaleb has spent over a year in prison and at the time of writing he remained held at al-'Ain Central Prison. No information was available on whether the sentence of flogging has been carried out.

Amnesty International is also concerned at reports that Elie Dib Ghaleb was beaten in prison, and urges the authorities to investigate these reports and bring to justice anyone found responsible. It also calls on the authorities to end the use of flogging as a judicial punishment, which it considers to be cruel, inhuman and degrading.