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Saudi Arabia: Five beheaded and ‘crucified’ amid ‘disturbing’ rise in executions

Saudi Arabia must halt a “disturbing” rise in death penalty usage that has resulted in at least 47 state killings in the country already this year, Amnesty International urged after six more people were executed today.

Five Yemeni men were beheaded and “crucified” this morning in the city of Jizan, while a Saudi Arabian man was executed in the south-western city of Abha.

“Saudi Arabia’s increased use of this cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment is deeply disturbing and the authorities must halt what is a horrifying trend,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa director.

“The Kingdom must immediately establish a moratorium on executions with a view to abolishing capital punishment.”

Pictures today emerged on social media appearing to show five decapitated bodies hanging from a horizontal pole with their heads wrapped in bags.

The beheading and “crucifixion” took place in front of the University of Jizan where students are taking exams.

In Saudi Arabia, the practice of “crucifixion” refers to the court-ordered public display of the body after execution, along with the separated head if beheaded. It takes place in a public square to allegedly act as a deterrent.

A sixth execution today was carried out in Abha, where the Interior Ministry reported that a Saudi Arabian man was executed for murder.

There have been at least 47 executions in Saudi Arabia so far in 2013 - an increase of 18 compared to this time last year, and a rise of 29 compared to the same period in 2011.

Today’s six executions mean at least 12 people have received the death penalty in Saudi Arabia in May alone. Of those killed this year, at least 19 are foreign nationals.

Saudi Arabia’s Interior Ministry today said the five men executed in Jizan were found guilty of forming an armed gang, armed robbery and the murder of a Saudi Arabian man. It is unclear if all five were convicted of the murder.

Saudi Arabia applies the death penalty for a wide range of crimes including “adultery”, armed robbery, “apostasy”, drug smuggling, kidnapping, rape, “witchcraft” and “sorcery”.

Some of these so-called offences, such as “apostasy”, should not even be criminalized under international standards.

The increase in executions for drug-related offences appears to be continuing, with at least 12 executed so far in 2013.

Twenty-two people were executed for such offences last year, compared with three in 2011 and just one in 2010. Non-lethal crimes such as drug-trafficking are not accepted as “most serious crimes” under international standards applicable to the death penalty.

Rates of executions in the country are feared to be higher than declared, as secret and unannounced executions have been reported.

Authorities in Saudi Arabia routinely flout international standards for fair trial and safeguards for defendants, who are often denied representation by lawyers and not informed of the progress of legal proceedings against them.

They may be convicted solely on the basis of “confessions” obtained under torture or other ill-treatment.

Saudi Arabia also continues to execute individuals for crimes they allegedly committed while under the age of 18, in breach of international law.

In January 2013, a Sri Lankan domestic worker who was 17 when she allegedly killed an infant in her care, was beheaded. Rizana Nafeek had no access to lawyers and claimed she was forced to make a “confession” under duress.

In March 2013, seven men, two of whom were under 18 when arrested, were shot in a public square, also in Abha.

They were not officially informed of their execution, but found out about it through friends and relatives who had sent them photos of seven mounds of earth being erected in the public square.

“States have an obligation not to practise the death penalty in secrecy, nor to apply it in a discriminatory manner,” said Philip Luther.

“Saudi Arabia continues to breach a multitude of applicable international standards.”

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception.