

AI Index: PRE 01/494/2012
16 October 2012

Saudi Arabia must halt attempts to stifle peaceful protest

The Saudi Arabian authorities must withdraw their threat to deal “firmly” with people taking part in demonstrations and refrain from detaining those who exercise their right to peaceful protest, Amnesty International said.

The organization’s call came after the Minister of Interior issued a statement last week warning anyone taking part in demonstrations that they would face prosecution and be “firmly dealt with” by members of the security forces.

“The Saudi authorities must end their repeated moves to stifle people’s attempts to protest against the widespread use of arbitrary detention in the country,” said Philip Luther, Director of Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Programme.

“The right of people to peaceful protest must be respected and the security forces must refrain from detaining or using excessive force against people who exercise it.”

The Ministry of Interior statement also disclosed the names of 10 people who have undergone, or are undergoing, judicial procedures in relation to crimes of “the deviant group”. They included in this list human rights activist Mohammed Saleh al-Bajady, who was sentenced in April 2012 to four years’ imprisonment and a five-year travel ban for communicating with foreign bodies “to carry out activities that undermine security”.

He was also reportedly convicted of participating in the establishment of a human rights organization, harming the image of the state through the media, calling on the families of detainees to protest and hold sit-ins, contesting the independence of the judiciary and having banned books in his possession.

He has been held since his arrest on 21 March 2011, a day after he attended a demonstration in the capital Riyadh by families of detainees protesting that their relatives were held without charge.

He is a co-founder of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), an unregistered NGO which was set up in 2009 to campaign for civil and political reforms. It has also campaigned on behalf of detainees held without charge or trial and those they consider to be political prisoners.

“Amnesty International considers Mohammed Saleh al-Bajady to be a prisoner of conscience convicted on charges that amount to the criminalization of his rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly,” said Philip Luther.

“He appears to have been targeted for his human rights activism and must be released immediately and unconditionally.”

Background

Although protests in the kingdom are banned, they have been regularly taking place since February 2011, particularly in the Eastern Province. Hundreds of people have been arrested, though most have been subsequently released.

Since November 2011, around a dozen men have died and a number of others injured after being shot by the security forces during or in connection with protests in the Eastern Province. Saudi Arabian authorities have stated that the deaths and injuries occurred during exchanges between the security forces and individuals who had used firearms or Molotov cocktails, but there are concerns that the security forces in at least some cases used excessive – and lethal – force against unarmed protesters.

Most recently, on 26 September 2012, around two men were killed and a third died from his injuries later when security forces raided a house in order to arrest one of 23 men wanted for “stirring up unrest”. The wanted man was killed, along with two of his companions. Amnesty International is not aware of the exact circumstances of the deaths and is calling on the authorities to order an impartial and independent investigation.

There has also recently been an increase in the number of protests taking place in other areas in support of those who have been detained, some without charge or trial, in the name of “security”. During the last few weeks, protests have occurred on this issue in the capital, Riyadh, and the Qassim Province.

On 23 September 2012 scores of people, including women and children, were surrounded by security forces and forced to remain without food or water until the following day after they gathered in the desert around Tarfiya prison in Qassim to call for the release of their relatives.

Scores of men were reportedly arrested the following day and beaten at the time of arrest. Rima al-Jareesh, who had previously been arrested for participating in protests calling for her relative to be charged and tried or else released, was apparently beaten when she tried to prevent the men’s arrests. Most of them were released shortly after.