

Theme leaflets (5)

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Saudi Arabia

Defying world trends

Death Penalty

“ I asked the sergeant, ‘Where is he going?’ And he said, ‘To the court.’ I said to Ruel, ‘You see, it’s OK, you’re going to court.’ He said, ‘Rene, no one goes to court at this time in the morning’.”

Ruel Janda, a Filipino convicted of robbery in Saudi Arabia, was right. Later that day, in May 1997, he was beheaded. His last conversation was reported to Amnesty International by a fellow detainee, Rene Camahort.

Sadiq ‘Abd al-Karim Mal Allah, a Saudi Arabian Shi‘a Muslim, was executed in 1992. Neither he nor his family knew that he was under sentence of death or for what “crime” he had been convicted. He was apparently charged with smuggling a copy of the Bible into Saudi Arabia. He denied the charge, but was reportedly requested to convert to Wahabism, an interpretation of Islam favoured by the state. When he refused, the judge was reported to have told him: “You abandon your rejectionist belief or I will kill you.” On 3 September 1992 he was publicly beheaded in al-Qatif.

These cases illustrate the intense fear and secrecy surrounding the imposition of the death penalty in Saudi Arabia. Those facing execution are rarely told in advance the date of execution. Sometimes prisoners are not even aware that they have been sentenced to death.

The death penalty is frequently imposed following summary and secret trials. None of those executed has had access to a lawyer. Some have been convicted solely on the basis of “confessions” extracted by torture.

Saudi Arabia’s increasing use of the death penalty flies in the face of the worldwide trend towards abolition. The scope of the penalty has been widened and covers many non-violent crimes. People have been executed for apostasy (renunciation of one’s faith), “witchcraft”, adultery, “highway robbery” and drug offences, as well as for murder. The death penalty is mandatory for the vaguely defined offences of “acts of sabotage and corruption on earth”, which have been used to punish those exercising their right to freedom of expression. In addition, there appear to be no legal safeguards to ensure that juvenile offenders aged under 18 are not sentenced to death.

Saudi Arabia has one of the highest rates of executions in the world. At least 103 people were executed in 1999, as recorded by Amnesty International. In the past 20 years 1,163 people are known to have been executed. The true figure is probably much higher.

Only the Saudi Arabian authorities know how many people are currently under sentence of death. Amnesty International is aware of at least 45 prisoners reportedly held on capital charges. Among them is Abdul Karim Vastel, a 24-year-old Afghan national, who was arrested in 1996 and is reportedly under sentence of death for murder, after getting into a fight with another man who later died. Like all those sentenced to death in Saudi Arabia, he will have no meaningful opportunity to appeal against this irrevocable punishment.

[box text]

Amnesty International unconditionally opposes the death penalty in all circumstances on the grounds that it is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment and violates the right to life. Such irreversible punishment is inflicted despite the risk of human fallibility, resulting in miscarriages of justice and the execution of innocent prisoners. The risks inherent in capital cases are compounded in Saudi Arabia by the structural defects of the criminal justice system.

Write to the Saudi Arabian authorities and ask them to:

- \* Clarify the case of Abdul Karim Vastel and commute his sentence if he has been sentenced to death.

- \* Implement measures to halt executions and reconsider the policy for the use of the death penalty.
- \* Stop imposing the death penalty for non-violent offences.
- \* Ensure that prisoners facing trials for capital offences are guaranteed the additional safeguards for fair trial provided by international human rights standards.

Addresses:

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Every day people in Saudi Arabia suffer violations of their basic human rights. Their suffering is perpetuated and hidden by a system based on secrecy and fear, and is largely ignored by the world’s governments.

Anyone who dares voice dissent is likely to be imprisoned. Women face systemic discrimination. Anyone not in a position of influence is at risk of arbitrary arrest and detention, particularly members of religious minorities and those deemed to have broken the country’s strict moral codes.

People are arrested with little or no explanation. They are denied access to a lawyer. They are tortured and ill-treated. They are convicted after secret and summary trials, sometimes solely on the basis of confessions extracted under duress. They face punishments including execution, amputation and flogging and in all cases have no meaningful right of appeal.

The Saudi Arabian government refuses to allow outside scrutiny of its human rights record and has ignored Amnesty International’s many requests for information, constructive dialogue or implementation of reforms that would protect human rights.

Amnesty International is stepping up the pressure. It is issuing a series of documents to highlight the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia and to demand action from the authorities and the international community to put an end to the secrecy and suffering in Saudi Arabia.

Please join us! Your help is needed.

Captions

Front photo: A photographer records a public execution in Jeddah from behind the bars of a window

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Sadiq ‘Abd al-Karim Mal Allah © Private

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