

AI INDEX: MDE 23/23/00

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12.00 HRS GMT 28 MARCH 2000

Saudi Arabia: Global campaign to end secrecy, suffering and silence

"I ask you in the name of God and humanity... to help me because I have no one who could help me here in Saudi Arabia. My poor family has done everything they could but I believe they have lost hope... In this prison...we cannot have contact with the outside world, we cannot defend ourselves..."

A letter from a woman facing murder charges punishable by death - 1999

Every day, terror and injustice are suffered by people in Saudi Arabia but the world's governments appear indifferent to their plight, Amnesty International said today as it launched its first worldwide campaign to expose and combat the widespread human rights violations in the country.

"We are launching a campaign today against arbitrary arrest, torture and executions in Saudi Arabia because it's high time the barrier of secrecy and silence was broken," the organization said.

"We want to end the suffering in Saudi Arabia. Suffering which is caused primarily by the secrecy that shrouds the criminal justice system. Suffering which takes place while the international community sits back in silence."

Secrecy and fear permeate almost every aspect of the state structure in Saudi Arabia. Victims and eye-witnesses are too scared to talk. Anyone who dares to voice dissent is harshly punished.

"Any criticisms, independent thought or activity that might challenge the state's policies, arouse the wrath of the government and invariably leads to brutal retaliatory action," Amnesty International stressed.

"This creates a climate of fear which is fed by secrecy -- by a government that bans all political parties, trade unions, independent lawyers' associations and human rights organizations. A government which disregards the most basic tenets of human rights."

Amnesty International has repeatedly drawn the Saudi Arabian Government's attention to human rights abuses. It has repeatedly invited the government to engage in a constructive dialogue to redress such abuses. The response? Silence.

Responsibility for the dire situation rests not only with the Saudi Arabian Government but also with the international community. Governments have been silent on Saudi Arabia for far too long which is why Amnesty International will be taking its concerns to the United Nations (UN) Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, which has yet to publicly address the serious human rights situation in the country.

"Last year, UN member states let Saudi Arabia off the hook, as it was dropped from scrutiny under the confidential 1503 procedure. But how long can the rights of 19 million people be subordinated to economic and strategic interests?" Amnesty International asked. "How long can governments be silent about the gross human rights violations in Saudi Arabia? Violations which affect a wide range of victims."

Victims of discrimination: Political and religious opponents of the government, migrant workers, women and other powerless individuals emerge time and time again as victims of discrimination.

"The authorities, as usual, did not inform his family and nobody knows exactly where he is now and what is the charge against him...please try to raise this case... We can do nothing here..."

This appeal was received by Amnesty International regarding the arbitrary arrest and detention of Sayyed Munir al-Khabaz, a Shi'a religious scholar, arrested on 3 December 1999. Political opponents and religious minorities are at constant risk of indefinite detention without charge or trial. Vaguely worded laws, open to wide interpretation, encourage the arbitrary administration of justice and the imprisonment of individuals on political or religious grounds.

Foreign nationals may be tricked into signing confessions in Arabic, a language they may not understand, and be unable to contact anyone to intervene on their behalf, particularly those from poorer countries who often have very little money and know very few people in Saudi Arabia.

"Anyone not in a position of power or influence caught in the web of the criminal justice system is at risk of state abuse of power," Amnesty International stressed. "Once trapped in this web, there is only one guaranteed outcome -- their basic human rights will be violated."

"Punishment could be death, amputation of a limb or flogging, after trials that make a mockery of justice," the organization added.

Executions: As Amnesty International launches its campaign this week two people will probably be executed in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has one of the highest rates of executions in the world in both absolute numbers and per capita, now averaging two a week.

A month ago today, Hassan bin Awadh al-Zubair, a Sudanese national, was beheaded after being officially convicted of "sorcery". He was one of 13 people executed between the end of January 2000 and today on varying charges. No information was provided by the government on how these victims were tried or what opportunity they were offered to defend themselves.

This is not new. More than 1,000 people have been executed this way during the past 20 years. However, information received by Amnesty International reveals the horror of how such victims are convicted and their lives taken away.

"They did not give me a chance to defend myself... They tied me up like an animal... The officer put his shoe in my mouth, beat me up, put me in a cell, and did not allow any visits. He threatened me with worse treatment if I refused to agree to the confession in court."

Abdul-Karim al-Naqshabandi, a Syrian officially convicted of "witchcraft", was beheaded shortly after he wrote this letter. He had no idea that he faced imminent execution. Like many before him, he was simply made to sign his life away with a confession that was tortured out of him.

Torture: *"I told my investigators... 'What crime do you have against me?'... Their answer was nothing else but beating me... "*

Many traumatized men and women have spoken to Amnesty International over the years about their suffering at the hands of the arresting authorities. Their testimonies illustrate a culture of brutality, torture and ill-treatment in many police stations, prisons and detention centres across the country.

"Torturers in Saudi Arabia will continue torturing for as long as the criminal justice system fails to provide safeguards," Amnesty International argued. "Incommunicado detention, a criminal justice system which from the

outset treats suspects as guilty, and the lack of independent mechanisms for reporting torture and investigations into allegations, all foster a climate of impunity."

Muhammad 'Ali al-Sayyid, a former prisoner who suffered 4,000 lashes and seven years' imprisonment for theft, told Amnesty International recently about when he was taken before a judge to ratify his confession which he claimed was tortured out of him: *"The judge asked me: did the theft happen? ..I said no. He said to the police take him back... And as soon as he said that I changed my plea and said yes it did happen. I did that in order to avoid returning to the police station and torture.. and that is how I signed my statement"*.

A hand cut off or a foot and hand cut off -- such irrevocable punishments that amount to torture are imposed in Saudi Arabia for theft, burglary and highway robbery after grossly unfair trials. Amnesty International knows of 96 cases of judicial amputations in the past 18 years -- seven between the end of January 2000 and today -- but the true figure could be higher.

Failure to meet international human rights obligations: Even though Saudi Arabia has ratified a number of international human rights treaties, it has blatantly failed to live up to its responsibilities.

"Respect for human dignity and justice -- values intrinsic to the religious, social and cultural traditions of Saudi Arabia, and guaranteed by international law -- are consistently violated to protect the interests of the government," Amnesty International maintained.

"It is time that Saudi Arabia met its obligations under international law and standards. These are standards that are drawn from values found in all cultures and which Saudi Arabia has freely ratified. It cannot turn its back on it."

"The challenge now facing the authorities is to introduce the changes in law, the judicial process and practice that will make the rights in these treaties a reality. Only then is there any hope that the climate of secrecy and fear which permeates the state institutions in Saudi Arabian will end," the organization said.

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For more information please see the following Amnesty International materials:

- *Saudi Arabia: A Secret State of Suffering*, AI Index: MDE 23/01/00
- *Saudi Arabia: End Secrecy, End Suffering -- An Amnesty International briefing*, AI Index MDE 23/16/00
- Appeal cases and theme leaflets
- Video News Release; script also available in Arabic

To arrange an interview, please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on

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