

AI Index: PRE 01/125/2012
09 March 2012

Saudi Arabia: At least six men held for a year for intending to protest

A year after the planned "Day of Rage" demonstration in Riyadh, at least six men are languishing in jail for their involvement in the event, Amnesty International said today in a new briefing paper.

In *Saudi Arabia's 'Day of Rage': One year on* the organization says that it has recently learnt that in addition to Khaled al-Johani, who had been thought to be the sole protester on 11 March 2011, four other men were detained on that day and remain in detention. A sixth had already been arrested on 4 March 2011.

Amnesty International said that it believed that five of the men had not been charged or tried in the year since their arrests.

"Holding people for a year merely for intending to protest is completely unconscionable. But that is what it seems the Saudi authorities have been doing in the name of security," said Philip Luther, Amnesty International's interim Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"The fact that we have only just found out about four of these men gives us real concern that there are others swept up in arrests around the time of last year's demonstrations who we are yet to find out about.

"It is time for the authorities to come clean about who is being held for acts of protest and on what basis."

The five men arrested on 11 March 2011 and still held are Khaled al-Johani, Fadhel Nimr Ayed al-Shammari, Bandar Muhammad al-Utaybi and Thamer Nawaf al-Ezi, and a man believed to be called Ahmed al-Abdul Aziz. Muhammad al-Wad'ani had been arrested on 4 March 2011.

Khaled al-Johani and Muhammad al-Wad'ani are reportedly detained at al-Ha'ir prison while the other four detainees are apparently held at al-Malaz jail in Riyadh.

Amnesty International has detailed information indicating that at least one of the men held at al-Malaz jail was tortured or otherwise ill-treated after being detained.

While being held at the Ministry of Interior's General Directorate of Investigation (GDI) he was reportedly deprived of sleep for three days by being splashed with water every time he fell asleep.

In addition, it seems, his hands were tied to an iron bar for up to eight hours at a time, during which time he was unable to sit down, and he was subjected to beatings.

The same detainee was also apparently denied adequate medical treatment. Despite the recommendation of a prison doctor that he be transferred to a hospital three months ago so that damage to his spine,

possibly caused by beating, could be examined and treated, he remains in prison without access to specialist medical care.

Only one of the men has been brought to trial in the year since their arrest, to Amnesty International's knowledge.

In February this year Khaled al-Johani was brought before the Specialized Criminal Court in Riyadh, a tribunal set up in 2008 to try detainees held on terrorism-related charges. The court adjourned his case until early April.

At the trial hearing the General Prosecutor read out the list of charges against him, which included supporting demonstrations, being present at the location of a demonstration and communication with foreign media in a manner that harmed the reputation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Amnesty International is calling on the Saudi Arabian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Khaled al-Johani and all other detainees held solely for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and assembly. Other detainees should be released unless they are charged with a recognizably criminal offence and promptly tried in proceedings that fully adhere to international fair trial standards.

The organization is also urging the authorities to drop the charges against Khaled al-Johani, which it says are incompatible with international human rights standards.

"The authorities must launch an immediate and independent investigation into the reports of torture and other ill-treatment and ensure that anyone found responsible for such abuses is brought to justice," said Philip Luther.

The six men are not the only people to have been arrested in Saudi Arabia in connection with protests in the last year. Security forces have arrested hundreds of people, particularly in the east of the country, for protesting or voicing their opposition to government policies.

Most have been released without charge; others remain in detention without charge or trial; and others still have been charged with vague security-related and other offences.