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## **Saudi Arabian human rights defender banned from travelling to US**

A travel ban on a prominent Saudi Arabian human rights defender imposed just before he planned to attend a democracy course in the United States must be lifted immediately, Amnesty International said today.

Waleed Abu al-Khair, 33, a human rights lawyer, was told he was not allowed to leave the country, just days before the start of the six-week course at Syracuse University, New York.

"The travel ban on Waleed Abu al-Khair is completely arbitrary and violates his right to freedom of movement, and seems to violate Saudi Arabian rules and regulations," said Ann Harrison, interim Deputy Middle East and North Africa Programme Director of Amnesty International.

"The Saudi Arabian authorities must lift this unjustified ban immediately and allow Waleed Abu al-Khair to travel to the United States to carry out his studies."

Abu al-Khair had enrolled in the Leaders for Democracy Fellows Program at the university's Maxwell School, sponsored by the US State Department, and was due to begin the course on 26 March 2012.

But he was summoned to the Ministry of Interior's Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution in his home city of Jeddah on 21 March and told that he was banned from travelling due to "security considerations".

When he asked for exact reasons, he was told: "We do not have details; our mission is to inform you."

On 24 March, the day he was scheduled to attend a reception in New York with his coursemates, Abu al-Khair was told by officials at the Ministry of Interior that there was no time frame for when the ban would be lifted.

Saudi Arabian law states that a prohibition to travel can only be issued by a judicial ruling or the Minister of Interior for specified reasons that are related to security, and that it should be imposed for a given time.

"Abu al-Khair's travel ban was not issued by judicial ruling, and the 'security considerations' given as the grounds for this prohibition failed to be specific and were open to broad interpretation," said Ann Harrison.

"At the very least we can say this travel ban is unjust. Otherwise, we can only speculate about the possible reasons that may have triggered the Saudi Arabian authorities' decision to impose such a ban - but most likely it is related to his or his wife's work in defending human rights."

Abu al-Khair's wife, women's rights defender Samar Badawi, was presented with the International

Women of Courage Award by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and First Lady Michelle Obama on 8 March 2012. It is not known if this is related to the travel ban.

However, in early March Waleed Abu al-Khair travelled from Saudi Arabia to Kuwait to attend a conference on women's rights without encountering any problems.

Travel bans against those calling for greater respect for human rights in Saudi Arabia are common.