

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL JOINT PUBLIC STATEMENT

15 April 2024 MDE 23/7945/2024

TEN YEARS AFTER HIS ARBITRARY ARREST, NGOS CALL FOR SAUDI HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER WALEED ABU AL-KHAIR TO BE RELEASED

Monday, 15 April 2024 marks the tenth anniversary of the arrest of Saudi human rights defender Waleed Abu al-Khair, who is serving a 15-year prison sentence as a result of his peaceful human rights activism. He has repeatedly been ill-treated in prison, including being denied vital medical care. The undersigned organisations call on the Saudi authorities to allow him immediate access to the medical care he requires, and to immediately and unconditionally release him, as well as all other prisoners unjustly detained for peacefully exercising their fundamental rights.

Waleed Abu al-Khair is a prominent human rights defender and founder of the NGO Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia (MHRSA). He has spent much of his life advocating for democratic reforms in the country and, before his arrest, provided legal representation for many victims of human rights abuses.

Abu al-Khair was arrested on 15 April 2014 after refusing to sign a pledge to give up his human rights activism and became one of the first activists to be tried and sentenced under Saudi Arabia's draconian Counter-Terrorism Law. He was tried in the Specialised Criminal Court, an exceptional jurisdiction that was set up in 2008 to try cases of terrorism but has since been used to prosecute numerous peaceful human rights defenders. It is notorious for disregarding legal safeguards.

On 6 July 2014, Abu al-Khair was sentenced to 15 years in prison, to be followed by a 15-year travel ban and a fine of 200,000 Saudi Arabian riyals (more than £35,000) as punishment for his lawful and peaceful human rights advocacy. The charges against him included "inciting public opinion against the State and its people"; "inciting international organisations against Saudi Arabia with the intention of ruining its reputation"; and "setting up and supervising an unlicensed association", namely the MHRSA, which he registered in Ontario, Canada after it was denied a licence in the kingdom.

In 2015 and 2018, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) released formal opinions in which it found his arrest, prosecution, conviction and sentencing to be arbitrary and in contravention of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On both occasions the WGAD called on the Saudi authorities to immediately release Abu al-Khair, provide reparations, and investigate his unlawful arrest, detention and conviction.

Throughout his time in detention, Abu al-Khair has suffered ill-treatment by prison authorities including solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, restricted visits, and denial of food, medications and adequate medical care, which has prompted him to carry out several hunger strikes in protest. In recent months, for example, he has been repeatedly beaten by another inmate in Dhahban Prison and was refused a transfer to a hospital. The Saudi authorities continue to deprive him of needed medical care.

Both before and since his arrest, Abu al-Khair has received support and recognition for his work from across the world. He and fellow Saudi human rights defenders Abdullah al-Hamid and Mohammad Fahad al-Qahtani jointly received the 2018 Right Livelihood Award for their "visionary and courageous efforts, guided by universal human rights principles, to reform the totalitarian political system in Saudi Arabia". Abu al-Khair has won several other prestigious international awards for his work, including the Law Society of Upper Canada's Human Rights Award, the Olof Palme Prize, the Ludovic Trarieux International Human Rights Award, the PEN Pinter Writer of Courage Award, and the American Bar Association's International Human Rights Award.

Waleed Abu al-Khair is just one prominent example of the many Saudi human rights defenders unjustly detained and wrongfully imprisoned for peacefully exercising their internationally protected fundamental human rights. Hundreds of people in Saudi Arabia are currently serving lengthy prison sentences based on the authorities' abuse of the repressive Counter-Terrorism, Anti-Cybercrime, and other national and state security laws that are systematically used to silence peaceful dissenting voices in the kingdom.

These widespread rights violations were raised in January 2024 during Saudi Arabia's latest Universal Periodic Review (UPR), when UN member states issued a long list of recommendations that included the release of prisoners of conscience and revision of the Counter-Terrorism and Anti-Cybercrime Laws. We insist that the Saudi authorities must accept these important recommendations and work to implement them, and we urge human rights supporters everywhere to join this petition for them to do so.

On this day, the tenth anniversary of Waleed Abu al-Khair's arrest, we again call on the Saudi authorities to allow him immediate access to the medical care he requires, and to immediately and unconditionally release him, as well as all other prisoners of conscience unjustly detained for peacefully exercising their fundamental rights.

Signatories:

ACAT-France

ALQST for Human Rights

Amnesty International

English PEN

FairSquare

FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

The Foundation of Anna Dahlbäck Memorial Fund

Freedom House

Freedom Now

Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)

Human Rights First

Human Rights Watch

Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada

MENA Rights Group

Middle East Democracy Center (MEDC)

PEN International

Right Livelihood

World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders