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## **Saudi Arabia urged to spare lives of foreign nationals amid surge in executions**

Three foreign nationals convicted of drug-related offences in Saudi Arabia must not be executed, Amnesty International said amid reports of a surge in executions in the kingdom since the beginning of the year.

Ali Agirdas, a Turkish national, as well as Sheikh Mastan and Hamza Abu Bakir, both Indian nationals, may be executed at any time following their conviction for drug smuggling and drug possession.

“The recent surge in executions in Saudi Arabia is a disturbing pattern, which puts the country at odds with the worldwide trend against the death penalty,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“King Abdullah must halt the execution of these three men and all those on death row for drugs-related offences. Their sentences must be commuted and an immediate moratorium on executions should be imposed as a first step towards the abolition of the death penalty in Saudi Arabia,” she said.

Ali Agirdas, aged 31, was arrested in February 2007 for smuggling drugs in Riyadh and was convicted and sentenced to death by a General Court in the capital in June the following year.

His sentence is being considered by the King who can approve it at any time. Ali Agirdas did not have a lawyer or an interpreter during his interrogation and was only assisted by a lawyer during his appeal.

“Amnesty International is opposed to the death penalty in all circumstances. The fact that Ali Agirdas did not receive the assistance of a lawyer during his trial before the General Court in Riyadh further highlights that capital punishment should be abolished” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

“However strongly the Saudi Arabian authorities support the death penalty, they must at the very least recognize that no one should be executed after such flawed legal proceedings and commute their death sentences.”

Sheikh Mastan and Hamza Abu Bakir are currently detained in al-Dammam prison in the country’s Eastern Province. They were arrested in January 2004 on charges of drug possession and sentenced to death by a court in al-Dammam in June 2006. Very little is known about their trial except that their sentences are said to have been upheld on appeal.

The plight of the three is even more precarious in the wake of reported executions of eight men since the beginning of the year, including five for drugs-related offences. Two men were put to death on Tuesday - Muhammad Abdul Malak Ajjaj, a Syrian national, was executed in al-Jouf and Saudi national Hamad bin Salem bin Muhammad al-Ghabari al-Yami, was put to death in al-Jizan.

Death sentences imposed for drugs-related offences do not fall into the category of “most serious crimes” embodied in international standards such as the UN Safeguards.

These require that the scope of crimes punishable by death “should not go beyond intentional crimes with lethal or other extremely grave consequences”.

Since 2007, at least 356 people, including 162 foreign nationals, have been executed by the Saudi Arabian authorities.

Saudi Arabia applies the death penalty for a wide range of offences. Defendants are rarely allowed formal representation by a lawyer, and in many cases are not informed of the progress of legal proceedings against them. They may be convicted solely on the basis of confessions obtained under duress or deception.