

AI Index: PRE 01/100/2013
01 March 2013

Saudi Arabia must stop playing “cat and mouse” game with peaceful protesters

Hundreds of people detained in Saudi Arabia in the wake of a protest against the incarceration without charge or trial of their relatives must be immediately and unconditionally released, Amnesty International said today.

At least 176 men and women were arrested in the early hours of this morning after staging a peaceful protest outside the Bureau for Investigation and Public Prosecution in Buraida, a city north of the capital Riyadh, in Qassim province.

They were calling for the release of more than 50 women and children, themselves detained since 27 February for their participation in another peaceful demonstration complaining about the incarceration of their relatives.

According to reports, those arrested this morning have been transferred to a prison in Tarfiyah, east of Buraida, while those detained since 27 February continue to be held at the central prison in Buraida. No one has had access to the outside world.

“This cat and mouse game authorities in Saudi Arabia are playing is, simply, outrageous,” said Philip Luther, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Amnesty International.

“Instead of persecuting peaceful protesters, what the Saudi Authorities should do is listen to their demands and release all those held solely for exercising their human rights.”

The women and children held since 27 February were demanding the release of their relatives, incarcerated without charge or trial or beyond the end of their sentences. Some of the women also called for the sacking of the Minister of Interior.

One of the women arrested, Rima al-Jeraish, is now in hospital after allegedly being beaten by female guards who tried to force her to remove all her clothes to carry out a search.

According to information received by Amnesty International, she lost consciousness after her head was banged against a wall and now has a broken arm and bruises on her body.

Protests are banned in Saudi Arabia and criticism of the state is not tolerated.

However, since 2011 protests have been held by relatives of those held without charge or trial with increasing frequency in towns and cities around the country.

“There is no justification for the long-standing ban on demonstrations in Saudi Arabia. The authorities must respect the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and release the protesters immediately and

unconditionally,” said Philip Luther.

Those who do criticize the government are often held incommunicado without charge, sometimes in solitary confinement, and denied access to lawyers or the courts to challenge the legality of their detention.

Torture or other ill-treatment is frequently used to extract “confessions” from detainees, to punish them for refusing to “repent” or to force them to make undertakings not to criticize the government.

When authorities do press charges, it is sometimes with vaguely worded offences that cover conduct that should not be criminalized, such as “disobeying the ruler”. Defendants are generally denied legal counsel, and in many cases, they and their families are not informed of the progress of legal proceedings against them. Court hearings are often held behind closed doors.

The Qassim province police issued a statement today confirming that 161 men and 15 women had been arrested early this morning for unlawful gathering and reiterated that they would deal firmly with all those who oppose the ban on gatherings, marches and sit-ins. They also said that they had arrested six children, but that they were trying to hand them over to their families.