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Saudi Arabia: Punish human rights violators not human rights defenders. Oral intervention at the UN Human Rights Council 20th Session (18 June – 6 July 2012)

3 July 2012

Item 8: Follow-up to and implementation of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action
General Debate

Oral statement

Mr. President,

The Vienna Declaration and Program of Action recognises that non-governmental organizations should be free to carry out their human rights activities without interference.

Amnesty International is seriously concerned that through trials based on spurious charges and arbitrary restrictive measures like travel bans, Saudi Arabian authorities are engaged in a campaign to cow Saudi Arabian human rights defenders into silence.¹

The case of Mohammad Fahad al-Qahtani is a prominent example of a series of recent trials aimed at silencing human rights defenders in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The charges against him include setting up an unlicensed organization, understood to be the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), “breaking allegiance to the ruler”, accusing the judiciary of allowing torture and accepting confessions made under duress, describing the Saudi Arabian authorities as a police state, inciting public opinion by accusing authorities of human rights violations, and turning international organizations against the Kingdom.

Another founder of ACPRA, Mohammed Saleh al-Bajady, was sentenced in April 2012 to four years' imprisonment followed by a five-year travel ban for what appear to have been charges that amount to the criminalisation of his exercise of his rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. Charges accused him of participating in the establishment of a human rights organization, harming the image of the state through the media, calling on the families of political detainees to protest and hold sit-ins, contesting the independence of the judiciary and possessing banned books.

¹ “Saudi Arabia ramps up clampdown on human rights activists”, at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/saudi-arabia-ramps-clampdown-human-rights-activists-2012-06-18>.

Amnesty International urges the Saudi authorities to allow human rights defenders to carry on their crucial work of exposing human rights violations and calling for justice and accountability. Instead of repressing leading human rights defenders, the Saudi Arabian authorities should be investigating the human rights violations they have documented. All charges related to peacefully exercising the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly must be dropped, and persons detained pursuant to such charges must be released immediately and unconditionally.

Rights of minorities are also another key concern of the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action. On 28 May 2012, Amnesty International published a report² detailing a range of human rights violations against protesters and others exercising their right to freedom of expression in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The report documents patterns of human rights violations in the Eastern Province against mainly Shi'a Muslims suspected of participating in protests or of engaging in activities that are protected by the right to freedom of expression, but that are seen by the authorities as a challenge to the government or sympathetic to protesters in Bahrain.

Amnesty International urges the Saudi Arabian authorities to respect the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association, end the arbitrary detention of peaceful protesters, and put a stop to torture and ill-treatment of persons detained.

Thank you Mr. President.

² Saudi Arabia: Dissident voices stifled in the Eastern Province, MDE 23/011/2012, 28 May 2012. At: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE23/011/2012/en/35243c61-37c3-461b-9df1-087e825a205a/mde230112012en.pdf>.