

AI Index: PRE 01/332/2010  
01 October 2010

## **Saudi Arabian King urged to commute “sorcery” death sentences**

Amnesty International has written to King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia urging him to commute death sentences imposed on two men convicted of “sorcery”.

Lebanese national ‘Ali Hussain Sibat and ‘Abdul Hamid bin Hussain bin Moustafa al-Fakki, from Sudan, are both sentenced to death on this controversial charge, which has been used to punish people for exercising their right to freedom of expression.

In a letter to King Abdullah sent on Thursday, Amnesty International called on him to show clemency in both cases. If the death sentences are upheld after appeal, they will be referred to the King for final ratification.

“Two men are at imminent risk of facing the ultimate cruel and inhuman punishment without having committed anything that would appear to constitute a crime,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

The “sorcery” charges against ‘Ali Sibat relate to his former role as a presenter on the Lebanese satellite TV station Sheherazade, in which he gave advice and predictions about the future.

He was sentenced to death by a Madina court on 9 November 2009, following his arrest by the Mutawa’een (religious police) in May 2008 while he was visiting Saudi Arabia on a form of Muslim pilgrimage, the umra.

‘Ali Sibat was given no legal representation or assistance during the trial hearings. His case is now before the Court of Appeal in Makkah for further review.

‘Ali Sibat’s lawyer in Lebanon told Amnesty International today: “[Lebanese] Prime Minister Saad Hariri spoke to his wife and promised that he would be home soon. But nothing has happened.” She is nonetheless continuing to campaign for his release.

‘Abdul Hamid al-Fakki, 36, was arrested in December 2005 in Madina by members of the Mutawa’een.

He was accused of practising sorcery after a man working for the Mutawa’een entrapped him by asking him to produce a spell that would lead to the man’s father leaving his second wife.

‘Abdul Hamid al-Fakki apparently said he would do this in exchange for 6,000 Saudi Arabian riyals (approximately US\$1,600). Following his arrest, he was questioned, apparently beaten, and is believed to have confessed to carrying out acts of “sorcery”.

He was sentenced to death by the General Court in Madina in March 2007. He had no legal assistance and

very little is known about his trial proceedings as they were held in secret.

‘Abdul Hamid al-Fakki’s brother told Amnesty International that he was “a very gentle man” and that their parents, both suffering from poor health, were tormented by the death sentence hanging over him. “How could they do something like this to him?” he said.

The detention of the two men on vague “sorcery” charges also contravenes international human rights standards by punishing forms of expression that, while unusual, have been peaceful.

“‘Ali Sibati and ‘Abdul Hamid al-Fakki must be immediately and unconditionally released if the acts for which they have been convicted amount to no more than the legitimate, peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and religion,” said Philip Luther.

The crime of “sorcery” is not defined in Saudi Arabian law. However, the authorities have arrested scores of people on “sorcery” charges in recent years.

The last known execution of someone charged with such an offence was that of Egyptian national Mustafa Ibrahim on 2 November 2007. He was convicted of “sorcery” and “witchcraft” for allegedly casting spells to attempt to separate a married couple.

The Saudi Arabian authorities resumed executions this month following the end of the moratorium that was in place during the Islamic month of Ramadan.

At least 158 people were executed in Saudi Arabia in 2007 and at least 102 in 2008. In 2009, at least 69 people are known to have been executed, including 19 foreign nationals. Since the beginning of 2010, at least 19 people have been executed.