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OVER 200 EXECUTIONS IN NINE MONTHS: NGOS CONDEMN ESCALATING USE OF THE DEATH PENALTY IN SAUDI ARABIA

We, the undersigned organizations, are horrified by the soaring number of executions in Saudi Arabia. According to data from the Saudi Press Agency, the authorities executed at least 200 individuals in the first nine months of 2024 alone, more than the number of executions for any whole year in the past three decades. This shows the Saudi authorities' flagrant disregard for the right to life and contradicts their own pledges to limit use of the death penalty. During their Universal Periodic Review (UPR) this year, the authorities accepted only one of the 22 recommendations relating to the use of the death penalty, showcasing their lack of commitment to meaningful reform.

Of the 214 individuals publicly reported as having been executed so far in 2024 (as of 9 October), 59 were executed for drug-related crimes, 46 of whom were foreign nationals, according to ALQST, Amnesty International, the European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (ESOHR) and Reprieve. This marks a sharp rise from 2023, which saw just two drug-related executions, and signals the total reversal of a previously announced moratorium on executions for such offences. This regressive trend raises serious concerns for the lives of hundreds of prisoners sentenced to death for drug-related charges, including 33 Egyptians. Two Egyptian nationals, Hani Mohammed and Suleiman Humeid, were executed on 28 September for drug-related offences. Such executions are in clear violation of international human rights law, which prohibits use of the death penalty for crimes that do not meet the threshold of the "most serious".

Throughout 2024, Saudi Arabia has continued to use the death penalty for non-lethal offences, which account for 41% of executions so far, including 13% (29 individuals) who were executed for non-lethal terrorism-related offences, which can include a wide range of acts such as taking part in protests, according to Reprieve. The implausible claim that Abdulmajeed Al Nimr, a Shi'a man executed on 17 August, had joined a terrorist cell affiliated to Al-Qaeda – a charge that did not appear anywhere in the court documents relating to his trial and sentencing – represents a flagrant example of the Saudi authorities' determination to brand legitimate dissent and protest as a form of terrorism.

Saudi Arabia has for years been among the countries carrying out the highest number of executions in the world. Yet, despite a pledge in 2018 from Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to reduce use of the death penalty, the rate of executions has continued to soar, apart from a relative lull during the coronavirus pandemic. As recently as March 2022, Mohammed bin Salman repeated this commitment to limiting the use of the death penalty, and yet that year saw the highest number of executions on record until that point. In 2023, the authorities carried out at least 172 executions, and the figure for the first nine months of 2024 already marks the highest rate in recent Saudi history. In the absence of transparency, and with executions sometimes carried out in secret, the real figures may be even higher.

The Saudi authorities are also failing to deliver on what have proved to be false promises in relation to use of the death penalty for juveniles. Currently, at least nine young men are at risk of execution, with several at imminent risk, for offences committed while they were below the age of 18. This is in violation of international human rights law, and directly contradicts official claims to have ended the practice. The young men's sentences all followed grossly unfair trials that failed to meet basic standards of due process, including by denying them legal counsel and access to criminal files, and admitting coerced confessions as evidence in court.

The authorities have also used the death penalty to stifle dissent in the online sphere. In July 2023, retired 55-year-old teacher Mohammed al-Ghamdi was sentenced to death for peaceful social media activity. Although this sentence was recently commuted to 30 years' imprisonment, his case highlights how the Saudi authorities have weaponised use of the death penalty as a tool to repress freedom of expression in the country. Meanwhile, Islamic scholars Salman al-Odah and Hassan Farhan al-Maliki, for whom the Public Prosecutor is seeking the death penalty on a range of vaguely formulated charges, continue to have their trials drag on for unknown reasons.

While continuing to carry out these egregious human rights abuses, the Saudi authorities are at the same time striving to rebrand their image on the international stage. Megacity projects such as Neom, massive investments in global sports such as the purchase of top football clubs and bidding to host the FIFA World Cup, as well as their bid for a seat at the United Nations Human Rights Council, all constitute efforts to sweep Saudi Arabia's horrendous human rights record

under the rug. As such, it is vital that the international community is not dazzled by such distractions, but focuses on the reality on the ground, namely the spike in executions and systematic crackdown on free speech.

In light of the alarming scale on which executions are being carried out in Saudi Arabia, we urge the authorities there to immediately establish an official moratorium on executions with a view to abolishing the death penalty for all crimes. Pending full abolition of the death penalty, Saudi Arabia must immediately remove from its laws any death penalty provisions which are in breach of international human rights law, such as its mandatory imposition, its use against people below the age of 18 at the time of the crime or for crimes which do not meet threshold of “most serious crimes” as stipulated in Article 6(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

SIGNATORIES

ALQST for Human Rights

Amnesty International

ECPM - Together against the death penalty

The European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (ESOHR)

Human Rights Watch

MENA Rights Group

Reprieve