

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

News Flash

AI Index: MDE 23/005/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 187
8 August 2003

Saudi Arabia: An urgent reform of the criminal justice system is needed

Amnesty International today urged the Saudi Arabian authorities to conduct a thorough review of the country's judicial system, following today's release of five British, one Canadian and one Belgian nationals who have been granted clemency.

"The Saudi Arabian criminal justice system must undergo a radical reform allowing more transparency in the administration of justice," Amnesty International said.

Summary, unfair and secret trials are the norm in Saudi Arabia and torture is a common practice to extract confessions from suspects. Defendants facing capital charge are invariably convicted after trials which lack the most basic standards of fairness. Those include the right to be assisted by a lawyer, the right to be tried in public and the right to effective appeal.

Amnesty International is concerned about hundreds of Saudi Arabian and other nationals who are held by the Saudi Arabian authorities, and who are denied the right of access to a lawyer before trial and access to their families. The legal status of most of those held from previous years remain secret.

Five British, one Canadian and one Belgian who were accused of staging several bomb attacks in the country in 2000 and early 2001 were released on Friday. They were convicted and sentenced after trial hearings which remain shrouded with secrecy. Two of them were sentenced to death while the other four were given long prison sentences. Two of them were shown confessing on television, which implied their guilt even before their trial had taken place. Amnesty International had also received reports that the six were tortured while in detention.

"The release of the six foreign nationals must be followed by the fair and transparent retrial of all other detainees whose trials have fallen short of international human rights standards," Amnesty International said.

"All allegations of torture and ill-treatment must be investigated promptly and impartially. The Saudi Arabian authorities must ensure that all detainees are treated humanely, allowed immediate access to lawyers and to their families." the organization concluded.

Background

Four Saudi Arabian nationals were executed in May 1996 after they were shown on television

"confessing" to having carried out the bombing of the Saudi Arabian National Guard training centre in Riyadh in November 1995. On the same day of their television appearance, the Minister of Interior, Prince Naif bin 'Abdul 'Aziz announced that the four would be tried and punished in accordance with the law, thereby suggesting that the four had not yet been tried. Their execution followed 40 days later.

The death penalty is applied to a wide range of offences and carried out with total disregard for international standards. Amnesty International recorded 1,409 executions in Saudi Arabia between 1980 and November 2002, including 123 executions in 2000. Though the death penalty in Saudi Arabia is applicable to all capital offenders without distinction, in practice it disproportionately affects the disadvantaged and the victims of discrimination such as foreign workers and women.

Saudi Arabian authorities have executed at least 48 people in the past year following trials about which very little was known. Twenty of them were foreign nationals, including three believed to have been convicted on charges of homosexuality. The number of prisoners under sentence of death was not known owing to the secrecy of the criminal justice system.

Among those known to be at risk execution is Sitti Zainab, an Indonesian domestic worker and mother of two children in her mid-thirties. She was convicted of murdering her female employer in 1999 after she allegedly "confessed" to the murder. She is reportedly detained in the women's prison in Medina, pending attainment of the age of majority of the child of her employer, who, according to Saudi Arabian law, can pardon her or demand that the death penalty be carried out. She is reported to be psychologically ill.

Amnesty International is still denied access to Saudi Arabia. The government has so far failed to respond to any of the concerns raised by Amnesty International during the year.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>