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Saudi Arabia: Threats and cyber attack will not deter women from driving

Saudi Arabian women activists still plan to defy a driving ban in the Kingdom on 26 October despite having their campaign website hacked and receiving repeated threats from the authorities to thwart the effort, Amnesty International said.

Early on Friday a hacker took down the website oct26driving.org, posting in its place the message “Drop the leadership of Saudi women .. Accident.” The cyber attack came just hours after a spokesperson for Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Interior reiterated a pledge to enforce the longstanding ban on women driving.

“Saudi Arabian authorities use the excuse that society at large is behind the ban and claim that the law does not discriminate against women. But at the same time they continue to harass and intimidate women activists,” said Said Boumedouha, Acting Middle East and North Africa Programme Director.

“This has included phone call and online threats, arbitrary travel bans and detentions, forcing activists and their family members to sign pledges not to drive, and using the state-controlled media to discredit activists.

“And twice this week the Interior Ministry has publicly removed any ambiguity about the authorities’ support for the ban on women driving. The ban and the ongoing scare tactics to maintain it are out of step with the modern world, and characteristic of the wider discrimination that crushes women’s freedom and besmirches the Kingdom’s reputation.”

Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world in which women are not allowed to drive. Although there is no official law banning women from driving, a ministerial decree in 1990 formalized an existing customary ban and women who attempt to drive face arrests.