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Saudi Arabia must investigate abuse against Sri Lankan domestic worker

Amnesty International has urged the Saudi Arabian authorities to investigate without delay allegations by a Sri Lankan woman that she was seriously abused and injured while employed recently as a domestic servant in Saudi Arabia and to bring the perpetrators to justice if the allegations are well founded.

According to press reports in Sri Lanka and information received by Amnesty International, L P Ariyawathie, a 49-year-old mother of three children, was severely abused by her employers in Saudi Arabia when she complained about her heavy workload. Her employers are alleged to have driven 24 nails and a needle into her hands, legs and forehead, causing severe injuries, which required hours of surgery when she returned home to Sri Lanka in August. Some of the nails are reported to have been up to 5cm long. Doctors who treated her in Sri Lanka said she had been deeply traumatized by her experience. She had reportedly travelled to Saudi Arabia to obtain employment as a domestic servant – as many other Sri Lankan women do to help support their families – in March 2010. She is reported to have told doctors that she was subjected to abuse in July before she left her employment and returned to Sri Lanka.

In a letter sent last week to Justice Minister Shaikh Dr Mohammed bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz al-‘Issa, Amnesty International urged the Saudi Arabian authorities to investigate the serious allegations of abuse made by L P Ariyawathie against her employers in Saudi Arabia and to ensure that those responsible are brought to justice in accordance with international fair trial standards and without recourse to corporal punishment, and that she receives reparation for the injury she has suffered.

The investigation should also examine whether the Saudi Arabian police or other authorities were informed of L P Ariyawathie’s allegations before her return to Sri Lanka and what action, if any, was taken in response. Any police officers or other officials who learnt of the alleged abuse but failed to take action should also be held accountable.

L P Ariyawathie’s allegations have highlighted the long-standing problems faced by domestic workers – many of them women from developing countries in Asia – in Saudi Arabia. They face the same discriminatory judicial practices as Saudi Arabian women but are more vulnerable as they also face language difficulties and the reality of being alone in a foreign land with no relatives to turn to for help and support. Such domestic workers are especially vulnerable to violence and exploitation by their employers and have little or no recourse against such abuse.

More needs to be done also by the authorities in the main labour supplier countries such as Sri Lanka to ensure that their nationals are adequately protected from abuses in the states to which they go to work and are afforded access to justice and reparation when they are subject to abuse. Some state authorities have recognized this and identified a need for effective monitoring and protection mechanisms to be established in labour receiving countries – as set out, for example, in Sri Lanka’s National Labour Migration Policy of 2008 – but, as yet, little has been done to put such measures in place.

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