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Saudi Arabia: Stop human rights violations committed in the name of fighting terrorism

The Saudi Arabian authorities have launched a sustained assault on human rights under the façade of countering terrorism, Amnesty International said in a new comprehensive report published today.

Thousands of people have been arrested and detained in virtual secrecy, and others have been killed in uncertain circumstances. Hundreds more people face secret and summary trials and possible execution. Many are reported to have been tortured in order to extract confessions or as punishment after conviction.

As recently as 8 July, the Ministry of Justice announced that 330 people had been tried for terrorism offences with sentences ranging from fines to the death penalty. The names of the people or the details of the charges were not disclosed, continuing the secrecy of the trial process.

“These unjust anti-terrorism measures have made an already dire human rights situation worse,” said Malcolm Smart, Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme. “The Saudi Arabian government has used its powerful international clout to get away with it. And the international community has failed to hold the government to account for these gross violations.”

Of the thousands detained by the authorities, some are prisoners of conscience, targeted for their peaceful criticism of government policies. The majority are suspected supporters of Islamist groups or factions opposed to the Saudi Arabian government's close links to the USA and other Western countries, which have carried out a number of attacks targeting Westerners and others, and are officially dubbed as “misguided”. They also include people forcibly returned from Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen and other countries.

“The abuses take place behind a wall of secrecy. Detainees are held with no idea of what is going to happen to them,” said Malcolm Smart. “Most are held incommunicado for years without trial, and are denied access to lawyers and the courts to challenge the legality of their detention. This has a devastating effect on both the individuals who are detained and on their families.”

The anti-terrorism measures adopted by the government since the attacks in the USA on 11 September 2001 have exacerbated long-standing human rights abuses in the country.

Arbitrary arrests and prolonged detention of political and security suspects without trial and without access to lawyers have been long-standing human rights problems in Saudi Arabia. However, the number of people being detained arbitrarily has risen from hundreds to thousands since 2001. Those arrested include Saudi Arabians and foreign nationals.

In July 2007, the Interior Minister reported that 9,000 security suspects had been detained between 2003 and

2007 and that 3,106 of them are still being held. Others have been moved to an official “re-education” programme though it is unclear how they are selected and under what conditions they can obtain release.

Reported methods of torture and other ill-treatment include severe beatings with sticks, punching, and suspension from the ceiling, use of electric shocks and sleep deprivation. Flogging is also imposed as a legal punishment by itself or in addition to imprisonment, and sentences can include thousands of lashes.

The Amnesty International report highlights how trials of political or security detainees in Saudi Arabia take place in extreme secrecy and fail to meet international standards of fairness. In March this year the government announced that the trials of 991 detainees accused of capital offences had begun in a special criminal court. In many cases defendants and their families are not informed of the progress of legal proceedings against them.

The anti-terrorism measures introduced since 2001 have set back the process of limited human rights reform in Saudi Arabia. Combined with severe repression of all forms of dissent and a weak human rights framework there is now an almost complete lack of protection of freedoms and rights.

Background

“Please do not abandon us to the claws of tyranny and blind power. I fear for myself, my children and especially for my husband, who is in detention. I don’t know what has happened to my husband, where he is, or what will happen to him. As for my children and for me, without him, we are the living dead. Please help me to get my husband justice. I beg of you in the Name of Allah.”

This is one of many cries for help that Amnesty International has received from the wives, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters of people whose human rights are being abused with impunity in Saudi Arabia in the name of security and counter-terrorism. Her name has been withheld for fear of reprisal.

Dr Saud al-Hashimi, a prisoner of conscience, is reported to have been subjected to torture and other ill-treatment several times since his arrest in February 2007. The latest such treatment is reported to have taken place in June 2009 for starting a hunger strike against his indefinite detention without trial. He was reportedly stripped of all his clothes, except his underwear, shackled and dragged from his cell and placed in a severely cold cell for about five hours. He and at least six other prisoners of conscience held with him in Dhahban Prison near Jeddah were targeted by the authorities for calling for political reform; discussing a proposal to establish an independent human rights organization in Saudi Arabia; and calling for an end to impunity for human rights violations committed by Ministry of Interior officials. The Ministry of Interior says they were arrested for collecting money to support terrorism, but the detainees strongly deny this. Since their arrest, they have been detained without charge or trial and held in solitary confinement, and they remain at risk of torture and other ill-treatment.

Abdul Rahman al-Sudais, a 48-year-old Saudi Arabian lecturer at Um al-Qura University in Makkah, was arrested in 2003. The government said that he was arrested with a cell of "terrorists" but his trial was held in secret and he was not allowed any legal assistance or representation. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found the detention of Abdul Rahman al-Sudais to be in contravention of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and said that "the fight against terrorism threats cannot justify undermining due process rights afforded to all accused..." In at least one other case, three of four defendants accused of responsibility for killings were executed and their bodies were crucified.

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Notes to editors

Amnesty International is investigating whether any of the individuals highlighted in the report are amongst the 330 people recently tried for terrorism offences.

Amnesty International experts are available for interview to discuss the report findings. To request an interview please contact Tom Mackey on +44 207 413 5810

Images from the report are also available on request.