

Amnesty International reports widespread human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia

By Jean Shaoul
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Amnesty International has called on the United Nations to break the “wall of silence” surrounding human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia. “It is high time the UN put aside political and economic considerations, and publicly scrutinised Saudi Arabia’s appalling human rights record,” an Amnesty spokeswoman said.

Launching a campaign to raise awareness both internationally and within Saudi Arabia about the human rights situation, Amnesty said, “Secrecy and fear permeate every aspect of the state structure in Saudi Arabia. There are no political parties, no elections, no independent legislature, no trades unions, no bar association, no independent judiciary, and no independent human rights organisations. Anyone living in Saudi Arabia who criticises the system is harshly punished. After arrest, political and religious opponents of the government are detained indefinitely without trial or are imprisoned after grossly unfair trials. Torture is endemic. Foreign workers are always at risk.”

Amnesty called on Saudi Arabia to ratify international treaties, to ensure fair trial, to prevent torture and ill treatment, and to end discrimination against women, religious minorities and migrant workers. It has launched a campaign among trade unionists following the publication of its 1999 report, available at: www.amnesty.org/ailib/aireport/ar99/mde23.htm

Its report notes that scores of people were arrested as suspected political or religious opponents, or on political or religious grounds, including possible prisoners of conscience. While private non-Muslim religious practices appear to be permitted, public worship is not. Up to 30 Christian migrant workers were arrested in Riyadh purely for their religious beliefs, after a copy of the Bible was found *outside* a house. One Philippine national was interrogated in hospital shortly after giving birth. She was kept under house arrest until her husband returned from the Philippines to be questioned about his religious activities.

Even Muslim religious practices must be vetted by government-appointed Islamic scholars. Islamic practices that do not correspond to the precepts of the dominant Wahhabi faction are banned and subject to criminal prosecution.

Hundreds of political prisoners arrested in previous years continue to be held without trial. Those still held include Shia and Sunni Muslim critics or opponents of the government. The Shia community is viewed with deep suspicion, particularly after the 1979 Iranian revolution. The Shiite community faces unequal access to social service and government jobs and is rarely permitted to build its own mosques or community centres. In November 1998, several *Mutawwa* (religious police) attacked and killed an elderly Shiite leader for repeating the call to prayer twice—a traditional Shia practice. Scores of prisoners detained in the wake of the 1996 bombing of the US

military complex of al-Khobar continue to be held without trial and possibly without charge.

There are allegations of torture and ill treatment. Dr. Omran Muhammed, a Kuwaiti national visiting Saudi for the Haj pilgrimage, was detained, apparently for his political views, and held in the General Intelligence headquarters and then in deportation prisons. While in detention he was beaten, kicked and suspended upside down with chains for hours at a time. He was denied contact with his family or the Kuwaiti embassy. After a few months, he was released without charged and deported to Kuwait.

Amnesty report that two prisoners have died in custody under conditions that suggest torture was a contributory factor. One had been held incommunicado for more than two years without trial or charge. There was no known official investigation into his death.

Most of the international attention has focused on the cruel judicial punishments that continue to be imposed, although information about both the court cases and the carrying out of such punishments is limited. Two people had a hand amputated after being found guilty of theft. Judicial punishments include floggings and executions. Victims included two Filipinos who were found guilty of performing illegal abortions and were sentenced to two years imprisonment and 700 lashes each.

A Human Rights Watch report [www.hrw.org/wr2k/Mena-08.htm] states that the number of executions rose to 84 before the end of 1999, from 29 in 1998. Death sentences are typically imposed for murder, rape, drug trafficking and armed robbery. The executions, usually beheadings, were carried out in public after Friday prayers. The majority of those publicly beheaded were foreigners, including two women. Until the mid-1990s, women were usually executed by firing squad in prisons and not in public. The stepping up of punishment for women follows increasing concern over the position of women in Saudi society.

Not only are punishments cruel, the legal procedures are positively medieval. There is no independent judiciary, sentencing is arbitrary and the justice system is manipulated by well-connected and politically powerful people. There is no publicly disseminated penal code or code of criminal procedures and the king has sweeping powers to appoint and dismiss judges and create special courts.

Under regulations issued by the Minister of the Interior in 1983, detainees have no rights to judicial review, habeas corpus, to legal counsel, to examine witnesses or even to call witnesses to speak in their defence. Saudi laws permit convictions based upon uncorroborated confessions. Crimes involving national security are so broadly defined that they encompass all non-violent opposition to the government.

The government owns all the domestic radio and TV stations and closely monitors the privately owned but publicly subsidised print media. It allows no criticism of Islam, the ruling family or the government. The government appoints and sacks editors-in-chief and dictates press content on sensitive issues. Foreign publications are routinely censored or banned. Telephones are frequently tapped and mail interfered with.

Local access to the Internet was made available for the general public through cafes and universities in December 1998, but only once filtering technology was in place to screen out material deemed dangerous for security or public morals. This month, the BBC reported that the authorities in Mecca had closed down a women-only Internet cafe for reasons of public morality. "What was uncovered was against both our religion and our traditions," said Brigadier Yousuf Matter of the civil police, but gave no details about what offence had actually been committed.

Women face institutionalised discrimination affecting their freedom of movement and association, their right to work and education. They are not allowed to drive, need written permission from a male relative to travel, cannot marry non-Muslims and their testimony in court does not carry the same weight as a man's.

The main victims of this climate of fear and intimidation are immigrant workers, who make up at least 35 percent of the 15 to 64 age group. Migrant workers are estimated to provide 84 percent of doctors, 80 percent of nurses, 55 percent of pharmacists and 25 percent of all teachers. When oil prices tumbled in the mid 1980s, Pakistanis, Indians, South Koreans, Indonesians, Nigerians and Filipinos replaced workers who until then had come from other Arab countries. More recently, the government has begun to replace expatriate workers with Saudis. Thousands of workers without proper papers were arrested and deported.

While the US has no formal treaty with Saudi Arabia, it has had extensive informal economic and security relations ever since Aramco, a consortium of four US oil giants, gained the sole concession to Saudi oil and began production after World War II. (See Anthony Cave Brown, *Oil, Gold and God, the Story of Aramco and the Saudi Kings*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1999.)

US officials have made few public comments on Saudi's human rights record, other than to note that women face discrimination. Saudi Arabia gets no mention in the State Department's budget presentation to Congress about programs to promote democratic values, civil society and human rights.

The systematic use of torture and intimidation and the flagrant abuse of basic democratic rights by the Saudi rulers are indispensable for maintaining their privileges and wealth. Ruled by a royal family of 7,000 princes, Saudi Arabia has none of the institutions of bourgeois democratic rule. "And because he [the king] controls the country's income and his position as head of the family comes first, describing Saudi Arabia as the world's largest family business becomes axiomatic" (Said Aburish, *The Rise, Corruption and Coming Fall of the House of Saud*, Bloomsbury, London, 1994).

A massive amount of the country's revenues goes straight into the pockets of the ruling family. While official figures are unavailable, opponents of the regime claim that 40 percent of national petroleum revenues goes to the royal family. Prince Sultan's expenses are rumoured to reach \$20 million a month. Even if these claims are inflated, there is no doubt that tens of millions of state funds are spent on the palaces, mansions, jets and cars of the ruling family.

Despite holding the world's largest petroleum reserves, and

producing one third of OPEC's oil, the country has run up deficits for the last 17 years. Every time a barrel of oil drops by one dollar it is said to cost Saudi Arabia about \$2.5 billion in annual revenue. Additionally, the mismanagement, corruption and open looting of the oil revenues by the ruling family means that the country is now in dire financial straits. Public debt is equal to a massive 120 percent of Gross Domestic Product. With the population growing by 3.5 percent a year, GDP per capita has fallen from \$16,650 when oil prices were high in the early 1980s to about \$8,000 in 1998. Many of its young people are unskilled and 15-20 percent of Saudis aged 20-29 are unemployed, as defence spending, welfare programs and investment in energy modernisation have been cut back.

Many Saudi firms are in poor financial shape: the Saudi Arabian Fertiliser Company posted a \$10 million loss, Al-Ahsa Development Company's profits fell by a third. Cement companies have incurred losses of more than 20 percent, while the Saudi Iron and Steel Company was forced to reschedule \$1.26 billion in loans to six different banks. Much of the government debt is owed to Saudi firms, and several of them have collapsed. The giant Bin Laden construction company is owed \$5 billion and has axed half of its 20,000 employees. Much of this debt is financed by local banks, which are now feeling the pinch, prompting several mergers.

Even with the recent rise in oil prices, the government is unable to sustain living standards, and resentment is growing at the presence of US military forces. The royal family lives in fear of strikes, uprisings in the Shia eastern region or even the sabotage of its oil facilities as discontent mounts.

It was in attempt to forestall such unrest and maintain its own privileges that the 75-year-old Crown Prince Abdullah, in effect Saudi ruler since King Fahd's stroke some years ago, recently announced a series of changes. Abdullah intends to promote foreign investment, the privatisation of the telephone and electricity industries, and tourism. The stock market, the largest in the Arab world, will soon open to direct foreign investment in order to lure foreign capital and prop up the ailing economy. The attempt to seek entry into the World Trade Organisation means that the ruling family must regulate the stock market, reform the tax code, property and employment laws.

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