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## **I am unjustly imprisoned in the UAE – why won't the UK government help me? - Ahmad Zeidan**

***In 2013, after being tortured, I signed a 'confession' to a crime I did not commit. All my non-British co-defendants have now been freed but I remain in jail. Why?***

The Guardian (26.08.2015) –

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/26/uk-citizen-imprisoned-uae-british-government-no-help> - Ahmad Zeidan, a British citizen, was 20 years old when he was arrested in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates in December 2013, along with six other young men. Zeidan was charged with drug offences and faced a death sentence, based on a "confession" extracted from him after eight days of torture. The authorities alleged they had found 0.04g of cocaine in the glove compartment of the car in which Ahmad was a passenger. After being held incommunicado for eight days, Ahmad filed a complaint against the arresting officers. The UAE government promised the UK government that it would investigate his torture and mistreatment, but it failed to do so and in May 2014 Ahmad was sentenced to nine years in prison. Since then, all of those arrested and convicted alongside Zeidan for the same offence have been pardoned and released. The Foreign Office said any comment on the continuing legal process would be "inappropriate" but has been in regular contact with Zeidan and his family since his arrest to "provide assistance".

I turned 22 on Tuesday. It was my second birthday behind bars. Before my arrest in 2013, I was a typical 20-year-old: a few months off graduating from university, I had a girlfriend, friends, parties, music. I was really looking forward to completing my degree in aviation management and to my future in the field. If you're a 20-year-old guy reading this, you get me. The old me.

In December 2014, I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder – a condition caused by the torture that I was subjected to when I was arrested. I try my best not to think about that night, when I was dragged out of my friend's car by Emirati police officers as we parked outside a mall in Sharjah, but sometimes the memories come flooding back.

The beatings came fast, mostly across my face. I still feel pain in my jaw to this day. An officer ripped the chain from my neck and began whipping me. I heard them taunting me, saying how happy they were to "catch" a Brit. Then began eight days of beatings, often while handcuffed. I wasn't allowed to contact my family or the British embassy. I

remember at one point being told to stand up, but being so exhausted that I collapsed. An officer grabbed me by the handcuffs and dragged me across the floor. I was stripped naked and they threatened to rape me. In the last few days, I was hooded and taken to solitary confinement. I asked where they were taking me, but they just beat me in response. Eventually, I was made to sign a document in Arabic, a language I don't read or write – this was my "confession". That piece of paper led to my jailing for nine years in Sharjah, but not before a long trial in which the state sought the death penalty on drugs charges.

Last night, I had a panic attack. I've been getting them a lot in prison. I don't sleep any more. I am desperately trying to preserve my mental strength, and trying to come to terms with the fact that I will be nearly 30 by the time I am released. What I can't accept is the British government's seeming refusal to help me.

UK consular officials know that my case, like many others in the UAE, involved a miscarriage of justice. They know that I was tortured into a bogus "confession" – they even helped my father, days after I was found, to file a complaint about my mistreatment, and to request that I be allowed to see a doctor – requests that the UAE authorities denied. And yet, the British government has refused to ask for my release. I am the only defendant left from my trial. My co-defendants – convicted of the same crime, but not from Britain – have all been freed.

I wonder what you would think if you could read my thoughts for a day in this prison? I am barely able to describe them myself. The thing that scares me the most are the flashbacks. They are intense, and leave me in constant fear. I relive the moments of my arrest and my torture like someone watching a DVD of that night on a loop – and I am just as powerless and helpless as I was at the time. I am afraid of being around other people and worse, I am scared that I am no longer myself – that I will never be the same person I was before. I ask myself every day, will I ever live a normal life again?

I am truly happy for my freed co-defendants. I felt nothing but joy on the day they were pardoned, even though I wasn't. Each time the amnesty comes around, I wait on edge, hoping my name is going to be on the list – and each time I am not, it chips away at my resolve. This Ramadan, the UAE pardoned nearly 900 prisoners. I genuinely believed that it was my time. I heard name after name being called, and I was sure my name was going to be next: some of those pardoned had been sentenced to 10, 15, and sometimes 25 years. But my name wasn't on the list.

I respect the ruler of Sharjah and the decisions he makes. And I don't blame the UAE; after all, I grew to love this country like a second home. The system is what it is here, and ultimately I have to respect that. But I can't understand why the British government has failed me; why the UK – with its strong relationship with the Emirates – can't support my request for freedom. My only conclusion is that the British government has other priorities in the UAE. I just want nothing more than to be back in the UK, to try to be a normal 22-year-old.

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## **UAE: Three women held in secret detention over tweets**

Amnesty International (27.02.2015) - Three women who have been detained incommunicado for nearly two weeks in a chilling display of repression by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are at risk of torture or other ill-treatment and must be urgently released, said Amnesty International.

The women, three sisters, disappeared after they were summoned for questioning at a police station in Abu Dhabi on 15 February after speaking out about their brother, who is a prisoner of conscience, on social media.

"The authorities are clearly punishing these women for speaking out on Twitter to draw attention to their brother's unfair trial. Shortly after posting a tweet that said 'I miss my brother', Asma Khalifa al-Suwaidi and her two sisters were summoned by police and now have vanished as if into a black hole," said Philip Luther, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Amnesty International.

"The authorities must recognize that attempts to silence critics and crush freedom of expression by resorting to deeply repressive tactics will backfire. They cannot arbitrarily lock up activists or their families indefinitely without charge, on a whim. The women must be immediately and unconditionally released, like all others detained solely for peaceful expression."

The three women, Asma Khalifa al-Suwaidi, Mariam Khalifa al-Suwaidi and Alyziah Khalifa al-Suwaidi, had been peacefully campaigning online for their brother Dr Issa al-Suwaidi. He is one of 69 people convicted after the 2013 unfair mass trial of 94 government critics and reformists, widely known as the "UAE 94" trial.

After they went to the police station for questioning, they never came home and have had no contact with their family. Their mother received a brief phone call from someone claiming to be a State Security official the next day who said, "Your daughters are fine", but provided no further information.

The sisters are believed to have been denied access to a lawyer. In cases that Amnesty International has documented, detainees held by the State Security are generally taken into secret detention facilities where they are held incommunicado for weeks or months with no access to their families or lawyers and where they are often tortured or otherwise ill-treated.

The women are among several other families of prisoners convicted following the UAE 94 trial who have been harassed, intimidated or arrested after criticizing proceedings or publicizing allegations of torture in detention on Twitter. A number of others have had travel bans imposed on them or had their passports confiscated.

"Despite trying to market itself as one of the most open and progressive states in the region, the UAE has a dark history of clamping down on dissent with an iron fist. The authorities are now making it nearly impossible for people to peacefully express criticism online without retribution," said Philip Luther.

The UAE has subjected scores of government critics and activists calling for reform to arbitrary arrest since 2011 and subjected many of them to lengthy incommunicado detention and, in some cases, enforced disappearance.

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## **Long delay ends in Abu Dhabi chainsaw killer case**

The National (27.12.2013) - A labourer who decapitated his roommate with a chain saw has been sentenced to death.

Pakistani SZ waited until they were alone their room before slicing his neck open on December 22, 2006.

He initially confessed to killing his roommate, claiming it was revenge after he had tried to rape him, but he later retracted this confession at Abu Dhabi Criminal Court.

The case has been delayed for so long while the court tried to track down the dead man's family.

Under Sharia, a victim's blood relatives must be asked whether they wish to seek the death penalty or be granted a blood money settlement.

The court finally decided to issue a verdict based on the Maliki school of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). If it proves impossible to find an heir, the court is allowed to presume on the relatives' behalf.

"The court has used all of its authority to find the blood relatives and were unable to reach them, or find an address for them if they did exist," the verdict read. "So it has become obligatory to continue with the procedures."

The decision was based on a forensics report by a committee of three doctors that stated the victim was "most probably" murdered.

The court was confident that the Pakistani's confessions to prosecutors were sincere because he described the events in detail, even if he denied them later in court.

A witness, A B, said he saw the Pakistani sitting on the victim's bed on the day of the incident.

Another witness, A M, said the Pakistani had missed work that day.

"The defendant did not show any rejection to these statements," the verdict stated.

The court said it was confident the murder was premeditated because the victim had deep wounds in his neck. It said he had waited for an opportunity when no one was around to attack his roommate.

"He pretended to be sick that day to skip work, and he went to the victim's room at a time when he was sure the victim would be in his room alone," the verdict stated.

The court said it was issuing a death sentence based on civil law terms and not Sharia, because vengeance – issuing a death sentence – requires three pre-conditions: the confession of the killer in court, two witnesses to the crime or "qasama" – an oath that needs to be repeated 50 times. As these were not met, the court issued the sentence under civil law.

On the day of the murder, police received a report of a suicide at a labour camp in Mussaffah.

They found the victim lying on his back on a metal bed with his throat slashed and his eyes open.

His right hand was on the bed while the second was hanging towards the floor. Beneath it lay the chainsaw.

The Pakistani's lawyer, Hassan Al Aidarous, had claimed the victim committed suicide and his client had only confessed under duress.

He said none of the three medical reports issued about the labourer's death proved he had been murdered.

"The first report suggested the labourer's death was suicide," he said. "The second report conducted by forensics in 2007 said it was not possible to determine if the death was suicide or murder.

"A third report concluded only that the labourer was "most probably" murdered.

"There is no ultimate evidence that the labourer's death was caused by a crime... court rulings are based on ultimate truth and not on doubt," he said.

All death sentences are subject to appeal and cassation before being executed.

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## **Sharjah Police arrest 313 illegal residents**

Emirates 24/7 (11.01.2014) - Sharjah Police arrested 313 people in December who have been living illegally in the emirate.

Most of them were either absconders or those who had entered the country after being deported earlier. They were also engaged in illegal activities such as begging.

The Department of Criminal Investigation of Sharjah Police who nabbed them has referred them to competent legal authorities.

Colonel Jihad Sahoo, Director of Criminal Investigation, Sharjah Police , most of them lived in abandoned old houses and construction sites.

He called on the public to alert authorities when they see illegal activities in their neighbourhood.

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## **Push to seal deal giving better rights to maids**

- ***Philippines keen to reach agreement.***
- ***Manila wants to end contract substitution and seeks minimum salaries, weekly days off and paid holidays for household workers.***

The National (30.12.2013) - The Philippines is hoping to finalise a deal that would help end contract substitution and protect the rights of Filipino maids in the UAE.

In May, the Philippines and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement for the kingdom to provide more rights and better protection to domestic workers.

A US\$400 minimum (Dh1,469) monthly salary was set, as were weekly rest days and paid holidays.

On January 27 and 28, the Filipino labour secretary, Rosalinda Baldoz, will meet Saqr Ghobash, the Minister of Labour, and Thikra Al Rashidi, Kuwait's minister of social affairs and labour, in Manila.

The ministers will plan for the Abu Shabi Dialogue, a ministerial consultation forum, to be held in Kuwait in November.

"We are faced with a promising new year for household service workers here in the UAE," Angel Borja Jr, the Philippines' labour attache in Abu Dhabi, said yesterday.

"We are hoping to strike a fair deal with the host government for the benefit of our workers."

The category of household service workers, most of whom are women, includes maids, nannies, family drivers, cooks, as well as gardeners.

In her official visit to the capital in September, Ms Baldoz began talks on the deal with officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Mr Borja, who began his job in July, said the deal was at the "rudimentary stage."

"We're starting off with the review of the existing employment contract and hope to adopt a similar agreement that we signed with Saudi Arabia," he said.

"We are looking into a substantive part of this agreement, which addresses four points on the ground situation.

"These include a strict compliance to the \$400 minimum salary; the passport should be in the possession of the worker at all times; one day off a week; and freedom to communicate with the family, and liberty to possess their own mobile phone to call their loved ones.

"We expect the bilateral agreement on domestic workers to be mentioned. "Another new feature of this forthcoming agreement is the implementation of a unified contract."

Foreign workers are asked to sign another contract upon arrival in the UAE.

"We are trying to reconcile two versions of the contract and find a happy combination," Mr Borja said. "One thing I can say is that the salary is not mentioned in the UAE version.

"From a legal standpoint, it is a form of violation that constitutes contract substitution. Unless the substitute contract is superior in terms of provisions, protective mechanisms and rights and benefits for workers, we will raise no issue over it."

The substituted UAE contract, he said, was "evidently inferior" than the approved contract by the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration.

"It is inferior in terms of the rights and benefits being granted - the protective provisions and the privilege to communicate with their families, which is a human rights issue." Mr Borja said.

There is hope the agreement will eventually ease crowding at the women's shelter in Al Bateen.

The shelter provides refuge to 55 women who have left their jobs complaining of being overworked, not being paid and mistreatment by their employers.

Mr Borja said they would be repatriated in the coming weeks.

Officials at the shelter receive two to three women a day, and at least 15 women a week are endorsed to UAE immigration before their flight home.

"There has been a progressive reduction in their number," Mr Borja said.

"It peaked at 90 last summer, but we recorded the lowest number, 28, on November 22."

Ms Baldoz has set a target of zero for all women's shelters overseas by the end of this year.

"I don't think we'll manage to achieve it," Mr Borja said. "We'll see the trend next month in terms of new arrivals."

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## **Rewards for hard labour**

***Workers in the building industry in the UAE have seen wages rise and conditions improve but they still face an extended absence from family and their homeland, which remains the hardest task of all.***

The National (30.12.2013) - Away from the bustling city, the gleaming towers and air-conditioned malls, there is another world.

It is a place where workers survive on small wages that belie how crucial their contribution is.

Mohammed Khan hails from Pakistan and has lived in labour camps (1) for the past 10 years.

He earns Dh120 (2) a day, shares a room with 10 and works long shifts on building sites across Abu Dhabi.

"Working in scorching hot and humid weather in the emirates, where temperatures can reach up to 50°C in summer, is no easy task," he said.

Mr Khan, 32, was a carpenter for seven years with a building company in Dubai when he first arrived in the UAE. He earned just Dh22 a day.

Now based in the capital, he has risen to the rank of foreman with a company that certifies scaffolding.

"Being a civil foreman is not an easy job. It involves a paramount pressure to finish construction tasks on schedule," Mr Khan said.

He starts work at 8am and finishes at about 5pm.

Mr Khan has to take the bus to whatever building site he is working on - sometimes it can take more than an hour, depending on the traffic.

While he has been promoted and makes more money now, life in the Workers' Village in Mussaffah was not exactly the one he dreamt about when he was a boy in Peshwar.

There he learnt carpentry skills from his father in their workshop.

At 22, he left for the UAE seeking a better life, one where he could send money back to his wife, parents and extended family in Pakistan.

In 2004, he paid 50,000 Pakistani rupees to an agent for a visa - but now people are ready to pay up to 200,000 rupees (Dh6,849).

He thanks the Government for improving conditions for labourers. A decade ago, safety measures were not as good. "We had to climb on upper floors through scaffolding without safety belts. Now no way," he said.

Hours were longer than - he had to start work at 6am and would not finish until at least 6pm. By the time he got back to the labour camp it could be as late as 8pm.

After more than a decade working on the building industry front line, he has seen many tragic accidents. Once, 15 people were crushed to death when a wall fell on them.

But the UAE has implemented strict new rules over the years and safety is now paramount.

"Now we don't begin the work until all safety steps are properly done. Because rules now at construction sites are very tough," Mr Khan said.

With all the development in the country, the conditions at labour camps have also vastly improved.

"Labour camps are our world. The life here is different from the city's enchanting lifestyles. We don't have resources or transportation to travel to the city. We are not even allowed to keep a bicycle here."

The food has also improved in the camps. There had been issues when one type of food was served to workers from many different nationalities. But now every taste is catered for and the camps hold parties on holidays. Friends are major comfort here, Mr Khan said.

"We meet, greet and share all moments, which keep us refreshed. During festivities we don't go out of the camps but invite all our friends from other camps and hold a big food fiesta outside the gated boundary of the camp," he said. "We bring a goat and slaughter it and cook, as we did this Eid Al Adha."

But it is at night that thoughts turn to family in Pakistan and plans to return for good to start a family.

A decade ago, workers would have to wait for a month to get a letter from home or spend money on a public phone booth, as mobile phones were too expensive. But now social media, such as Twitter, Facebook and Skype have helped to ease the loneliness.

Every evening the faces of their families from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and elsewhere flicker into their camp rooms and they can talk about how their day went.

"I miss here only my family but new technology has helped this too," Mr Khan said.

**HRWF Footnote:**

- (1) Labour camps must be understood as settlements for migrant workers and not places of detention
  - (2) 5 Dhr: 1 EUR
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## **Report a beggar to Dubai Police, win cash**

### ***Crackdown on beggars this Ramadan will reward residents***

Emirates 24/7 (16.07.2012) - Dubai Police along with several key civic departments have announced a concerted effort to stamp out illegal beggars this Ramadan.

At a press meet in the emirate on Sunday, the Department of Criminal Investigation in Dubai announced a plan that sought the help of residents of the emirate as well to cope with what officials described as "seasonal begging."

The police have divided and colour-coded neighborhoods and have also defined concentration of beggars in certain areas, their nationalities and their methods.

For the first time, the campaign involves cash prizes to those who report beggars in the emirate. The prize will be determined according to the degree of cooperation and the significance of the report," said the director of the tourism security division, Colonel Mohammed Al Muhairi, who heads the campaign."

The aim of this reward is to encourage the public to cooperate with the police and protect their emirate from this bad phenomenon."

In the first six months of 2012, 201 men and 63 women were arrested for begging.

"Beggars take advantage of Ramadan and go to mosques and markets to ask people for money.

"We will concentrate on these areas, as well as residential areas, where police patrols will make their rounds especially during peak times," said Col Al Muhairi.

The campaign runs until the end of the Eid Al Fitr holiday, and over 60 police patrols will take part in the campaign, which covers residential areas all over Dubai, as well as mosques, shopping malls, markets, petrol stations and parking lots.

In 2011 657 beggars were deported, while during last Ramadan, 168 beggars were deported.

Brigadier Khalil Ebrahim Al Mansouri, Head of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) at Dubai Police also encouraged residents not to give money to children who beg as it saves them from exploitation.

"People who have limited resources or face difficult situations in the UAE can contact any of the authorised charity and humanitarian organisations, who will study their individual cases and offer them help in a legal and safe manner," he noted.

"Many thieves take begging as a cover for their activities. They just knock at doors, pretending to be beggars. When no one answers, they rob the house. Other beggars resort to innovative ways to win the sympathy of people during Ramadan such as changing the features of their bodies so they will look as if they have a handicap," he told the paper.

Residents are urged to report beggars on the 800243 hotline.

### ***Sharjah campaign***

Sharjah Police also have a dedicated toll-free number 065632222 to report cases of begging in all its forms.

Residents can also report illegal car washers in public streets, street vendors, people who use their houses to display products, and loitering and other actions.

Sharjah Police also called on the public to display a sense of tolerance and maintain the sanctity of Ramadan.

The police can be contacted on 800 151 or via SMS on 7999 SMS or vial e-mail on [najeed@shjpolice.gov.ae](mailto:najeed@shjpolice.gov.ae)

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