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A call for help to Human Rights Without Frontiers

Human Rights Without Frontiers urges anyone who can help to contact Joanna Colomas

HRWF (04.09.2018) - My name is Joanna Colomas and I am a 23-year-old French national requesting any form of assistance in my inquiries about my missing fiancé, Basim Ahmed Bahmeed, born 09.05.1991, in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

We met in 2014 when we were students in Los Angeles and have been in a relationship since then. However, his family has always opposed our relationship and has continuously tried to keep us apart. They have unfortunately managed to prevent us from getting married to date, as it is complicated for a Saudi to marry a non-Saudi. We have also been trying to conceive and are presently following an IVF treatment, with the embryo transfer planned for next month. I understand that despite these circumstances, our not being married prevents me from being able to inquire about him through consular channels. For what it is worth, I am in possession of a sworn statement that solemnly declares we are in a stable relationship and live together in France, and I have a photocopy of his passport that I can provide upon request.

Up to 2016, his parents and siblings made death threats against him/us, and took his phone and passport away for several months so he would not be able to travel out of Saudi Arabia. As of 2017, seeing that we still intended to make a life together, Basim's parents resorted to more extreme actions, i.e, contracting a long-term bank loan in his name so he could not leave the country, or bribing officials so his criminal records showed that he owed hundreds of thousands of American dollars to the Saudi government for unpaid fines, which resulted in his arrest at the airport in Jeddah, KSA, when he attempted to travel to Nice, France on 07.03.2018. Some of the alleged infractions in his record dated back to 2008. Nevertheless, he had been able to travel out of Saudi Arabia by proving the fines were added recently using false dates.

He traveled for work from Nice to Dubai on 08.28.2018. He sent me confirmation of his arrival at Dubai airport by text at 02:20 am via WhatsApp, and he said he was heading to customs. I have not heard from him ever since and he has disappeared from social media and all other modes of communication. His phone is not turned off but the line seems

completely shut down. His number appears unregistered on WhatsApp. His phone number is/was +966555773041.

I have contacted all hospitals in Dubai and the surrounding area but have failed to localize him. I have called the Dubai police to report him as missing but was told that I had to come in person. I would travel to look for him without hesitation if only I did not fear being arrested too. Indeed, I have strong reasons to think that his family, knowing my name and passport number, may have added similar charges to my record in Dubai by means of bribery. I have also addressed an email to the Dubai police on Thursday 08.30.2018 and they told me that I "must contact Dubai Police via Diplomatic Channels, i.e. my Consulate or Embassy in UAE along with his passport copy"; however, the French Consulate and Embassy both have replied that they were unable to assist as he is not a French citizen. Due to past events and his family being aware of his imminent work transfer to Dubai, I believe that his parents may have once more succeeded in obtaining new charges added to his records, resulting in his arrest at customs.

I am extremely worried about him, his health and safety and really do not know what else to do to find him and help him. I would be so grateful for your assistance in this affair.

Sincerely,

Joanna Colomas
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Saudi moves youngest Shiite political prisoner to notorious jail

Saudi Arabia has moved the country's youngest political prisoner to a notorious jail in the eastern city of Dammam despite objections by human rights groups and the United Nations.

AhlulBayt News Agency (01.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2sz3WLD> - The European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR) said in a Tuesday report that 16-year-old Murtaja al-Qurayris had been moved to the Dammam Mabahith prison, where prisoners are tortured and ill-treated.

This came during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan when the authorities across Muslim countries typically pardon and release prisoners.

Murtaja al-Qurayris has already spent nearly three years in a Dammam jail without a formal charge or trial since his arbitrary arrest on 20 September 2014.

On that day, the 13-year-old was crossing the King Fahd Bridge connecting Saudi Arabia to the Persian Gulf state of Bahrain with his parents when he was stopped and arbitrarily detained without a warrant.

The Saudi regime has accused al-Qurayris of participating in peaceful demonstrations and in the funeral of protesters killed by the authorities in Eastern Province.

On January 20, 2017, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found al-Qurayris' detention "in contravention of articles 10, 11, 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

The UN group further called on the kingdom "to release the minor immediately and to accord to him an enforceable right to compensation in accordance with article 8 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

The group further noted that the Riyadh regime had ignored its communications on al-Qurayris and had not responded to them since September 2016.

According to the UN, al-Qurayris was interrogated a number of times without his legal representative or lawyer. The minor was also held in solitary confinement for a month and was tortured and ill-treated during that period.

ESOHR has documented more than 80 cases of juveniles whom the Saudi authorities have arbitrarily detained and tortured since the 2011 protests in Eastern Province.

It has also called for the immediate and unconditional release of al-Qurayris and all other juvenile political prisoners, seven of whom face execution.

The organization has voiced concern that moving al-Qurayris to the Mabath prison will lead to forcing him to sign confessions that would later be used to convict him. This concern arises from a pattern of similar cases where detainees were forced into signing confessions that were later used to convict them of terrorism crimes and to sentence them to death.

Saudi forces continue to besiege Awamiyah for 22nd day

Meanwhile, Saudi forces continue to terrorize thousands of civilians for 22 consecutive days in the traditional Mosawarah neighborhood of Awamiyah, a Shia majority town in Eastern Province.

On Wednesday, local residents and witnesses accused Saudi troops of attacking homes, ransacking businesses, stealing precious items and burning vehicles during the large-scale offensive.

Saudi troops also attacked the residence of Mohammad al-Ammar, a prominent political activist during the heavy-handed crackdown.

United Nations experts have already denounced the regime in Riyadh for razing the town, saying the move has erased cultural heritage and violated human rights.

Security forces equipped with heavy weapons have been deployed in Awamiyah since May 10.

Eastern Province has been the scene of anti-regime protests since early 2011. Riyadh has stepped up security measures in the Shia-majority region. Protesters want freedom of speech, the release of political prisoners, and an end to economic and religious discrimination exercised by authorities.

Demonstrations intensified in the province after the January 2016 execution of prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. The protests have been met with a heavy-handed crackdown by the regime.

Prominent Saudi actor wins defamation case against cleric

By Aisha Fareed

Arab News (31.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2qASo9b> - Saudi cleric Saeed bin Farwah was convicted in a defamation case and sentenced to 45 days in prison for verbally assaulting a Saudi actor last Ramadan.

TV star Nasser Al-Qassabi, best known for his socially controversial TV series, sued Farwah who reportedly defamed him by accusing him of being an "infidel."

The cleric called him "infidel" over an episode of his Ramadan series "Selfie" last year, which mocked religious men who break musical instruments.

The "Selfie" series addresses social issues in Saudi society and presents them in a comedic theme.

The case took a year in the legal system before the Court of Appeal in Assir finally endorsed the verdict issued by a court in Uhud Rufidah province.

Abdulrahman Al-Lahem, Al-Qassabi's lawyer, said that only Al-Qassabi can pardon the defendant because the case does not involve a public right.

"The defendant has been sentenced in accordance with the Saudi law," lawyer Majed Garoub told Arab News.

Garoub, an expert in fighting cybercrimes, said the ruling sends several messages to people. "First, it sends a message on how comprehensive the Saudi legal system is in all cases. Second, the legal system in Saudi Arabia preserves people's rights and dignity from unlawful assault, either through words or opinions."

He said the third message to be taken from the verdict is that everyone must know that there are clear limits between freedom of expression and verbal assault on either individuals or institutions.

"Freedom of expression is restricted by not prejudicing any party or entity," he added. Garoub said that the sentence confirmed many legal and religious lessons that would benefit society.

People should first have full confidence in the legal system, and, second, overcome the shame culture in litigation.

"It is very important to take legal action against all those who attack or insult individuals, society or institutions," Garoub said.

Al-Qassabi tweeted Tuesday that there is "no immunity for anyone no matter how long their beards or short their thobe is (signs of religious men). People's dignity is preserved by the law and nobody is usurping the role of the state."

The Saudi actor added that today's crisis is takfirism (intolerance for opposing thoughts) and "from now on, there won't be defamation without punishment."

Al-Qassabi received harsh criticism from conservatives this year as well, where he starred in an episode discussing thorny issues in Saudi society.

Waleed Abulkhair sits in a Saudi jail for speaking out

By Javier El-Hage and Celine Assaf Boustani

The Washington Post (12.07.2016) - <http://wapo.st/29yqDVq> - This week marked two years since a Saudi Arabian kangaroo court sentenced human rights lawyer Waleed Abulkhair to 15 years in prison for "inciting public opinion."

Abulkhair, 37, is one of the most visible representatives of Saudi Arabia's beleaguered civil society. In 2008, he organized a 48-hour hunger strike to condemn the detention of a group of political prisoners known as the "Jeddah Reformers." He has since continued to challenge the absolute monarchy by representing high-profile dissidents and calling for democratic reform. One of his former clients and brother in law was Saudi blogger Raif Badawi, who was himself convicted in 2013 for "insulting Islam" and sentenced to 10 years in prison, 1,000 lashes and a fine of 1 million Saudi riyals.

In 2009, Abulkhair founded the Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia (MHRSA), a civil society organization that reports on the abuses of the Saudi regime. He rapidly gained popularity in the region through his activism on social media. In 2015, Abulkhair was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and awarded the Ludovic-Trarieux human rights international prize.

The Saudi dictatorship is one of the world's worst violators of individual rights, including the right to freedom of expression. The kingdom scored the worst possible grade in Freedom House's 2015 Freedom in the World index, which ranks all 195 countries on their level of respect for civil and political rights.

The royal family exerts overt control over most newspapers and media broadcasts. Self-censorship is widespread and freedom of the press is practically nonexistent. The kingdom is particularly intolerant of criticism directed at the government, its officials, its religion and its politics.

This is the context that Abulkhair was trying to change. On Oct. 29, 2013, after he criticized the lack of independence of Saudi judges, Abulkhair was sentenced by a criminal court in Jeddah to three months in prison for "contempt of the judiciary."

Just a few weeks earlier, while the first case was still pending, a new battery of charges was unleashed. Because he was a public intellectual spreading his views through the Internet, the second indictment charged him with "harming the reputation of the Kingdom," "inciting the public opinion against the Kingdom" and "subverting public order in the Kingdom," under the newly-enacted anti-terrorism law and the anti-cybercrimes law.

One of the key tools in the repressive machinery of dictatorships the world around is the use of vague and overly broad "defamation," "insult" and "incitement" charges to criminalize even the most basic expressions of dissent.

Holding an open mic event at Plaza de la Revolución or reading Hannah Arendt's "The Origins of Totalitarianism" will land you in a Cuban jail for "inciting disorderly conduct." The 2010 Nobel Laureate Liu Xiaobo is still rotting in a Chinese prison for "inciting to overthrow the government" because, from his peaceable faculty position at a university,

he drafted and circulated a pro-democracy manifesto inspired by Václav Havel's Charter 77.

Abulkhair was sentenced in July 2014 to 15 years in prison, with a five-year suspended sentence, a fine of 200,000 riyals (approximately \$53,000) and a 15-year travel ban following his sentence. In January 2015, the court of appeal upheld the conviction and said he would serve the full 15 years after Abulkhair refused to apologize for his acts.

Since his imprisonment in 2014, he has been moved several times to different detention centers from Jeddah to Riyadh. He has been subjected to sleep deprivation, solitary confinement and denied access to his lawyer and family. He was last transferred to Dhahban prison, outside of Jeddah, and on June 7, he started a hunger strike to protest the ongoing ill treatment by his jailers who were denying him access to medical treatment and books. On June 12, Abulkhair ended the hunger strike after the authorities reinstated his access to books.

In a phone call over the weekend where he spoke to us in good spirits, he said that the public prosecutor assigned to his case has offered on several occasions that the king would release him if he repents for his crimes. Abulkhair's response? That he'd rather spend today reading in a prison as Saudi Arabia's freest man.

Women barred from entering Starbucks in Saudi Arabia

The Express Tribune (03.02.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1Ph2Png> - Saudi women going to the Starbucks café in Riyadh were surprised to find a board at the door asking them to keep out of the place, according to *Emirates* 24/7.

Images of the notice preventing women from entering Starbucks soon began showing up on Twitter.

The notice, in Arabic as well as English, reads, "Please no entry for ladies, only send your driver to order. Thank you."

The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, the most influential law enforcing authority in the Kingdom, ordered the café's management not to admit women, according to *Emirates* 24/7.

The commission issued the order after it found that the gender-separation wall ordered by authorities for all restaurants and other shops had collapsed.

The management told police that the wall had collapsed many times because of persistent stampedes by customers.

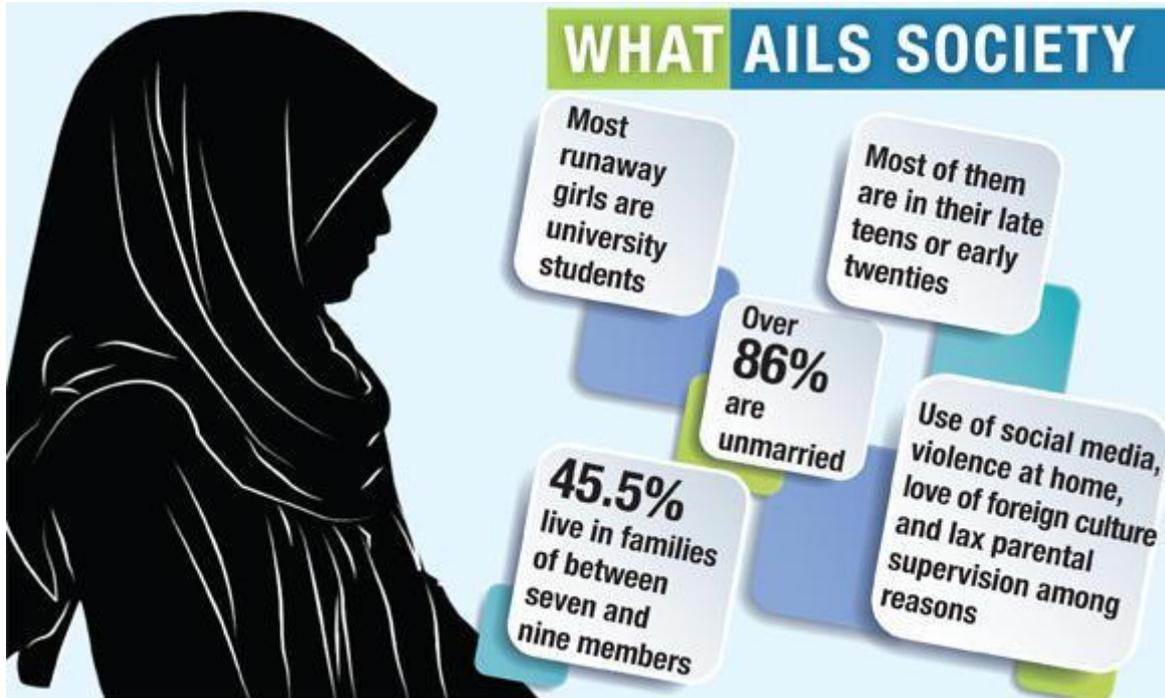
According to *Cosmopolitan*, Starbucks issued a statement explaining their action. "Starbucks in Saudi Arabia adheres to the local customs by providing separate entrances for families as well as single people. All our stores provide equal amenities, service, menu, and seating to men, women and families," the statement read.

"We are working as quickly as possible as we refurbish our Jarir store, so that we may again welcome all customers in accordance with local customs," it added.

Many took to Twitter to condemn the act.

96% of runaway girls are Saudis

A recent survey conducted in the Makkah region found that 96.3 percent of girls who ran away from their families are Saudis, while 3.7 percent are non-Saudi. The study showed 51.9 percent are female university students, 36.4 percent high school students, and 11.7 percent middle school students.



Arab News (05.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1OJaLwy> - The study showed 54 percent of runaway girls are between the ages of 17 and 21 years; 24.6 percent between the ages of 22 to 26; 15 percent under 16; and 5 percent older than 27 years. The study, conducted by academics from the University of Umm Al-Qura, showed that 86.1 percent of runaway young women who are not married; 10.2 percent are married; 0.5 percent are widows.

Of the unmarried young women, 81.3 percent live with their parents; 8.6 percent live with their mothers; 2.1 percent live with relatives; and 1.6 percent live with their fathers. The study showed 45.5 percent live in families of between seven and nine members; 34.8 percent live in families of between four and six people; 13.9 percent live in families with 10 members or more; 3.7 percent live in families consisting of three members or less.

The study, which is the first in the Makkah area, shows that the reasons for running away were misuse of social media, bad friends, misunderstanding of freedom, copying other cultures, weak beliefs, lack of emotional security, a need for adventure, bad treatment by husband, lack of dialogue with members of the family, verbal abuse, poverty, no monitoring by parents, subject to violence from one of the parents or brothers. An official of the Makkah Educational Directorate said everyone needs to feel safe and healthy, physically, mentally, and emotionally. A child who does not feel safe at a young age will grow up feeling insecure and unstable and without emotional security. The chairman of the team that conducted the research said the family is the first component of the community and its first building block and "here we focused on the role of families in cooperation with the problems of runaway girls, as well as the role of community institutions and the factors associated with girls escaping from their families."

Shi'ite cleric among 47 executed in Saudi Arabia

Reuters (02.01.2016) - <http://goo.gl/q8tXJe> - Saudi Arabia executed a prominent Shi'ite Muslim cleric and dozens of al Qaeda members on Saturday, signalling that it would not tolerate attacks, whether by Sunni jihadists or minority Shi'ites, and stirring sectarian anger across the region.

Hundreds of Shi'ite Muslims marched through Qatif district in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province in protest at the execution of cleric Nimr al-Nimr, an eyewitness said. They chanted "Down with the Al Saud!", the name of the ruling Saudi royal family.

Nimr, the most vocal critic of the dynasty among the Shi'ite minority, had come to be seen as a leader of the sect's younger activists, who rejected the quiet approach of older community leaders for failing to achieve equality with Sunnis.

Most of the 47 killed in the kingdom's biggest mass execution for decades were Sunnis convicted of al Qaeda attacks in Saudi Arabia a decade ago. Four, including Nimr, were Shi'ites accused of involvement in shooting policemen.

The executions took place in 12 cities, four prisons using firing squads and the others beheading. In December, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula threatened to retaliate against Saudi Arabia for any execution of its members.

The move further soured relations between Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia and its Shi'ite regional rival, Iran, which had hailed Nimr as the champion of a marginalised Shi'ite minority.

The website of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, carried a picture of a Saudi executioner next to notorious Islamic State executioner 'Jihadi John', with the caption "Any differences?", and the powerful Revolutionary Guards said "harsh revenge" would topple "this pro-terrorist, anti-Islamic regime". Saudi Arabia summoned the Iranian ambassador in response.

In Iraq, prominent religious and political figures demanded that ties be severed, calling into question fence-mending efforts by Riyadh that had been intended to boost a regional alliance against Islamic State militants.

MESSAGE TO SAUDIS

However, the executions seemed mostly aimed at discouraging Saudis from jihadism after bombings and shootings by Sunni militants in Saudi Arabia over the past year killed dozens and Islamic State called on followers there to stage attacks.

After the executions, Islamic State urged its supporters to attack Saudi soldiers and police in revenge, in a message on Telegram, an encrypted messaging service used by the group's backers, the SITE monitoring group reported.

Saudi Court sentences Sri Lankan female domestic worker to death by stoning

Colombopage.com (21.11.2015) - <http://goo.gl/0K2sDG> - A court in Saudi Arabia has sentenced a Sri Lankan female domestic worker to death by stoning for committing adultery.

The housemaid has been found guilty of having an illicit affair with a Sri Lankan man employed in Saudi Arabia. Reportedly, the maid has confessed to the crime.

Sri Lankan government has appealed the death sentence, Upul Deshapriya, spokesman of the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), told Arab News that the maid was recently sentenced to death after being found guilty of having an illicit affair with a Sri Lankan bachelor.

However, the Saudi Court has ordered that the man to be given 100 lashes as punishment, the SLBFE spokesman said.

The official said the Sri Lankan government has contacted the Saudi authorities get the maid's death sentenced reviewed. He said the Ministry is making efforts to save the maid's life.

The Sri Lankan housemaid, is reportedly a married woman with children in Sri Lanka.

Foreign Employment Minister Thalatha Athukorala's media secretary Nalin Rajapaksha has told Arab News that since the maid has already confessed and pleaded guilty, they are unable to request the Saudi government to lift the sentence.

"Therefore, our minister Athukorala filed an appeal before the Riyadh Court requesting it to reduce the punishment. The ministry has already made lawyers' payments through the Saudi Embassy in Sri Lanka," the official said.

In 2013, Saudi Arabia executed Sri Lankan housemaid Rizana Nafeek who was sentenced to death for murdering the son of her Saudi employer despite calls from all over the world to spare her life.

Remittances from Sri Lankan migrant workers in Middle East is a major source of government revenues.

European Parliament awards Sakharov Prize to Raif Badawi



Raif Badawi: a prisoner of conscience

Raif Badawi is the laureate of this year's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, following an October 29 decision by EP President Martin Schulz and the political group leaders. Badawi is a blogger from Saudi Arabia currently serving a 10-year prison sentence for insulting Islam on his website promoting social, political and religious debate.

European Parliament (29.10.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1P7rT32> - Badawi is a Saudi Arabian blogger, human rights activist and author of the website Free Saudi Liberals. He was arrested in 2012 and later sentenced to 10 years in prison, 1,000 lashes and a hefty fine for insulting Islamic values on his website.

He was administered the first set of 50 lashes in public in January 2015. The remainder were postponed following international protests. Earlier this week the wife of Raif Badawi, Ensaf Haidar, who is currently living in Canada with their three children, announced that the Saudi authorities have given the green light for the flogging to resume.

In February this year MEPs adopted a resolution strongly condemning the flogging of Badawi as "a cruel and shocking act" and calling on the Saudi Arabian authorities "to release him immediately and unconditionally as he is considered a prisoner of conscience, detained and sentenced solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression".

The finalists

Raif Badawi was one of this year's three finalists. Find out more about the democratic opposition in Venezuela embodied by the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática and political prisoners and the Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov here.

The Sakharov Prize

The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought is awarded each year by the Parliament. It was set up in 1988 to honour individuals and organisations defending human rights and fundamental freedoms. Last year the prize was awarded to Denis Mukwege.

Nominations for the Sakharov Prize can be made by political groups or by at least 40 MEPs. Based on the nominations, the foreign affairs and development committees vote on a shortlist of three finalists. After that the Conference of Presidents, made up of the EP President and the leaders of the political groups, select the winner.

British family says 74-year-old grandfather faces 350 lashes from Saudi Arabia for illegal wine

Worldwide Religious News (13.10.2015) - <http://wwrn.org/articles/45102/> - Karl Andree is a 74-year-old British grandfather. For the past 25 years, he has lived in Saudi Arabia, working with local oil companies. According to his children, he was quite happy there, even when his wife, Verity, was forced to return to Britain to help cope with her worsening Alzheimer's.

However, Andree has suffered serious problems in Saudi Arabia over the past year — and his problems may well spell trouble for relations between Britain and Saudi Arabia.

On Aug. 25, 2014, he was arrested by religious police in Jiddah after they allegedly found bottles of homemade wine in his car. He has served a one-year prison sentence for possessing alcohol, which is illegal in the conservative Islamic country. However, he has not been released — and his family said they believed he could face 350 lashes in a public flogging.

"My dad broke the rules in a country that does not allow alcohol, but he's served his time," his daughter, Kirsten, told the Sun tabloid this week. "Dad is 74 and not a well man. I worry he won't survive this ordeal."

In an emotional appeal published Monday, Andree's children called on British Prime Minister David Cameron to step in to help their father. The family said it had worked with the British Embassy in Riyadh — to no avail. "The Saudi government will only listen to him," Andree's son Simon told the Sun, referring to Cameron.

On Tuesday, Cameron's office indicated that the British leader will write to Saudi authorities to protest Andree's "extremely concerning" case. "Our embassy staff are continuing to assist Mr. Andree, including regular visits to check on his welfare, and frequent contact with his lawyer and family," a Foreign Office spokesman told WorldViews.

Saudi and British officials told the BBC on Tuesday that "there was never any question" Andree would have been flogged due to his age and ill health. However, his children had told the Sun that he was sentenced to the flogging last year and Saudi authorities had kept him in prison for two months longer than scheduled while they decided whether he would have to undergo the flogging.

Sevag Kechichian, a researcher with Amnesty International, says a local prison doctor would have decided whether to proceed with any planned flogging after assessing Andree's health. "He would be taken for a doctor's check-up just before the scheduled flogging, and the doctor would determine whether or not he is healthy enough to be flogged," Kechichian said. "That's the routine."

Andree's case comes after a groundswell of international criticism over Saudi Arabia's human rights record, sparked by the flogging of blogger Raif Badawi and reports of the planned execution of activist Ali Mohammed Baqir al-Nimr, who was arrested at 17 for allegedly taking part in anti-government protests. Saudi Arabia has responded to these criticisms forcefully over the past year, arguing that its legal system is based on sharia, or Islamic law.

The flood of criticism has brought heightened scrutiny of Britain's ties with Saudi Arabia, a major financial and political partner in the Middle East. On Tuesday, the prime minister's office announced that Britain had pulled out of a proposed \$9 million deal under which it would sell prison expertise to Saudi Arabia.

The proposed deal had proved exceptionally controversial in Britain, with opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn last month calling for the government to cancel it. The Times of London reported that the Conservative government had been split over it, with Justice Secretary Michael Gove reported as saying that he opposed supporting a regime that carries out beheadings and stonings, while Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond was worried that canceling the deal would make Britain look like an untrustworthy ally.

In an interview with BBC Radio 4, Simon Andree had suggested that Britain's business links to Saudi Arabia were to blame for the British government's slow reaction to his father's case. "He's at the bottom of a pecking order and all the business dealings with Saudi Arabia and the U.K. are probably taking priority over it," Andree said.

While the prime minister's office has stressed that the two issues are separate, the contract was canceled shortly after Andree's family made their appeal to Cameron. Speaking in Parliament on Tuesday, Gove said that security cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Britain had "saved British lives in the past" and should continue, but that there needed to be a balance with "standing up to the values that our citizens believe in and would like to see us promote."

Amnesty's Kechichian says that it is hard to predict how Saudi Arabian authorities would respond. "If they respond at all to criticism of their human rights record, the Saudi Arabian authorities typically deny outright any wrongdoing or dismiss criticism as an 'attack on Islam' or 'unacceptable interference' in the affairs of their judiciary," he said.

After the prime minister's announcement, Simon Andree told the Guardian newspaper that he was pleased that Cameron would step in, but he expressed reservations about the canceled prison deal. "I just hope that the breakdown of this deal won't affect" his father, he said. "It was never my intention. I hope it won't impact upon him. This case was always about my father's health."

Saudi Arabia is preparing to behead and crucify a 21-year-old activist

QZ.com (21.09.2015) - <http://qz.com/506932/saudi-arabia-is-preparing-to-behead-and-crucify-a-21-year-old-activist/> - A young Saudi Arabian Shi'a activist, who was sentenced to death last year, has lost his final appeal for justice and is due to be executed by

beheading, followed by the mounting of his headless body onto a crucifix for public viewing.

Human rights groups and Saudi critics are appalled by both the nature of the execution and the flimsy case against Ali Mohammed al-Nimr, though neither of these factors are unusual in today's Saudi Arabia.

Al-Nimr was arrested in 2012, at age 17, in the predominantly Shia province of Qatif, and accused of participating in anti-government protests and possessing illegal firearms. He has repeatedly denied the latter charge, although he was reportedly tortured into confessing the offenses after his arrest. According to Amnesty International, al-Nimr spent a short time in a juvenile detention facility before being transferred to prison when he turned 18, and was sentenced to death in 2014.

Al-Nimr was likely targeted because he is the nephew of Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimra, a prominent Shi'a cleric who was also sentenced to death in 2014. Al-Nimr's father is also a political activist.

"Ali was a vulnerable child when he was arrested and this ordeal began," said Maya Foa of the legal charity Reprieve, in a statement. "His execution—based apparently on the authorities' dislike for his uncle, and his involvement in anti-government protests—would violate international law and the most basic standards of decency. It must be stopped."

US talk show host Bill Maher raised al-Nimr's situation on television a few days ago, encouraging viewers to stop fretting about the American Muslim who was arrested for bringing a clock to school and instead show some concern for the Saudi who's going to be crucified for attending a protest. "If you haven't used up all your heroism hashtagging for the clock kid, maybe do it for this guy," Maher said.

Al-Nimr's imminent execution is drawing massive opposition to the United Nations' recent appointment of the Saudi ambassador to lead an influential human rights panel—a decision that critics called "scandalous."

Saudi Arabia executes 100th prisoner of the year

Huffington Post (16.06.2015) - Saudi Arabia executed two prisoners on Monday, the kingdom's 99th and 100th execution of 2015. The state has killed more prisoners in the first six months of this year than in all of the previous year, and is on pace to top the country's record 192 executions in 1995.

Syrian Ismael al-Tawm and Saudi Rami al-Khadi were the latest two to receive the death penalty in Saudi Arabia. Al-Tawm was convicted of trafficking large amounts of amphetamines into the country, and was beheaded in the northern region of Jawf, according to Agence France-Presse. Al-Khadi was executed in the country's west, in Taef province, for stabbing another Saudi man to death.

This year's sharp rise in executions has mostly occurred under the new King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud, who took over rule in the nation after the death of King Abdullah in January. But the use of capital punishment increased in Saudi Arabia last year as well: 19 people were beheaded in the space of 17 days in August, and total numbers were the highest in at least five years.

Activists and human rights organizations haven't been able to pin down a specific cause for this boom, The Guardian reported.

Saudi Arabia's harsh laws allow for the death penalty for a range of crimes including apostasy, adultery and sorcery, with public beheading the common method of killing. The majority of Saudi Arabia's executions stem from murder and drug-related crimes -- 47 of the 100 people killed in 2015 were convicted of nonviolent drug crimes, according to Human Rights Watch.

However, over half of the people executed this year were convicted of crimes that did not mandate the death penalty under Saudi Arabia's interpretation of Islamic law, but judges opted for capital punishment in these cases based on their own discretion, HRW reported. Rights groups have condemned the growing rate of executions, calling attention to the lack of access to fair trials and criticizing death sentences for being handed down without judicial restraint.

Last year, Saudi Arabia ranked third among nations for most executions. According to Amnesty International tallies, it was topped by Iran, which killed at least 289 people, and China, where numbers are too difficult to confirm but are believed to be in the thousands. Iraq and the United States were the next closest countries, executing at least 61 and 35, respectively. Saudi Arabia is the least populated of any of these nations.

Saudi Arabia advertises for eight new executioners as beheading rate soars

The Guardian (18.05.2015) - [Saudi Arabia](#) is advertising for eight new executioners, recruiting extra staff to carry out an increasing number of death sentences, usually done by public beheading.

No special qualifications are needed for the jobs whose main role is "executing a judgment of death" but also involve performing amputations on those convicted of lesser offences, the advert, posted on the civil service jobs portal, said.

The Islamic kingdom is in the top five countries in the world for putting people to death, rights groups say. It ranked third in 2014, after China and Iran, and ahead of Iraq and the United States, according to Amnesty International figures.

A man beheaded on Sunday was the 85th person this year whose execution was recorded by the official Saudi Press Agency, compared to 88 in the whole of 2014, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW). Amnesty said there were at least 90 executions last year.

Most were executed for murder, but 38 had committed drugs offences, HRW said. About half were Saudi and the others were from Pakistan, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, India, Indonesia, Burma, Chad, Eritrea the Philippines and Sudan.

Saudi authorities have not said why the number of executions has increased so rapidly, but diplomats have speculated it may be because more judges have been appointed, allowing a backlog of appeal cases to be heard.

Political analysts say it might also reflect a tough response by the judiciary to regional turbulence.

A downloadable pdf application form for the executioner jobs, available on the website carrying Monday's date, said the jobs were classified as "religious functionaries" and that they would be at the lower end of the civil service pay scale.

Why Saudi Arabia is poised to behead a dissident cleric and publicly display his corpse

VOX (14.05.2015) - Saudi Arabia is set to [behead a man](#) and [publicly display his headless body](#) (a practice called "[crucifixion](#)" in Saudi law) — for nothing more than speaking his mind. Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, an [internationally respected Shia cleric](#), was [sentenced to death](#) for "disobeying the ruler," "inciting sectarian strife," and "encouraging, leading and participating in demonstrations." His actual crime: participating in nonviolent protests and calling for the fall of the house of Saud.

It's not clear when the Saudis plan on executing al-Nimr: the country has a habit of both postponing executions and carrying them out without very much warning. But the case illustrates a basic fact about one of America's closest allies in the Middle East: its system of capital punishment is one of the cruelest on earth.

Why is Saudi capital punishment so barbaric? In many ways, the story is less about religion than it is about Saudi Arabia's unusual politics; yes, Saudi Arabia has politics. At the heart of it is the relationship between the Saudi monarchy and the country's ultra-conservative clerical establishment — an arrangement that dates back to 1744.

According to [Amnesty International](#)'s latest figures, Saudi Arabia executed at least 90 people in 2014. That is more people than any other country except Iran and almost certainly China (human rights groups [estimate](#) China conducts hundreds or even thousands of annual executions).

"Most death sentences in Saudi Arabia are carried out by beheading, often in public," Sevag Kechichian, [Amnesty](#)'s Saudi Arabia specialist, writes. Sometimes the Saudi government defaces the corpses afterward. The [Death Penalty Database](#) found "reports that Saudis have exposed the body (with head sewn back on) of the condemned to public indignity, including crucifixion, after execution."

Many of these people are executed for nonviolent crimes: in 2014, 42 of the 90 people executed were convicted on drug-related charges. Their trials generally didn't even come close to being fair.

"Trials in death penalty cases are often held in secret. Defendants are rarely allowed formal representation by lawyers, and in many cases are not informed of the progress of legal proceedings against them," the [Amnesty report](#) found. "They may be convicted solely on the basis of 'confessions' obtained under duress or involving deception."

Saudi Arabia's legal system is deeply theocratic. The interpretation of Sharia law that dominates the Saudi criminal system is extremely harsh, and is viewed with horror in much of the Middle East. Which raises an obvious question: if Saudi Arabia's barbaric system is such an outlier in its region, how exactly did it get so terrible in the first place?

In 1744, when the place we now know as Saudi Arabia was divided among many fractious clans, a minor clan leader named Mohammed ibn al-Saud met Muhammad ibn al-Wahhab, a Sunni religious figure preaching an austere, puritanical interpretation of Islam. They struck an [alliance](#): Wahhab would support the Saudi family as political rulers, and the Saudis would spread Wahhab's ultra-conservative doctrine and let him set religious code within their territory.

Wahhabism, as Wahhab's doctrines came to be known, gave al-Saud a believing tax base and an ideological justification for uniting the peninsula under his rule. "Without Wahhabism," [London School of Economics](#) Professor Madawi al-Rasheed writes, "it is highly unlikely that ... [Saudi] leadership would have assumed much political significance."

The Wahhabi movement played an integral role in the Saudi rise to power, and while much happened between then and now (including the al-Sauds' loss of power), the power-sharing Saudi-Wahhabi alliance remains the core of the state ideology to this day.

Wahhabism is a sort of fundamentalist revivalism, emphasizing a return to what its ultra-conservative proponents see as the core and original Muslim values. As such, it takes a [fairly literalist view of Islamic law](#) — and is willing to use the force of the state to back that up.

Punishments such as public beheadings are seen as barbaric by virtually the rest of the world — including the Muslim world. But in the Wahhabist view they are justified and, indeed, important, because they are perceived throwbacks to the Prophet Mohammed's seventh-century rule, and one of many ways in which the Wahhabists sought to turn back to clock to what they saw as a better era. That the punishments are medieval is the point.

In this view, "the death penalty or stoning for adultery and fornication, flogging and amputation for stealing, and punishments of retribution are sanctioned by the Quran and are unchangeable," legal scholar [Shahid M. Shahidullah](#) explains. Wahhabist interpretation of "sharia law is the exclusive foundation of criminal justice" in Saudi Arabia.

So the centuries-old political bargain between the Wahhabis and the ruling explains why the Saudi criminal code sanctions such brutal punishments.

In more recent generations, members of the Saudi royal family have been more likely to grow up exposed to outside ideas and educations, shaped by Western boarding schools and colleges as well as lots of time abroad. As that's happened, those individuals have [drifted away](#) from the country's Wahhabi roots.

That has brought some modest reforms to the justice system. But it has not changed the underlying system.

"Successive monarchs of the kingdom supported selective modernization of the kingdom in many areas, including law and justice," Shahidullah writes. "It is for this relatively liberal perspective of the Saudi ruling monarchy that a number of law and justice institutions have recently grown to establish strict procedural guidelines on the implementation of sharia law."

And yet, the beheadings remain. There are two main reasons for this, both of which have far more to do with politics than religion.

First, the Saudi royal family still believes it needs the support of the ultra-conservative clerical establishment to hold power, just as it did in the 1700s. And brutal punishments are a way of appeasing those clerics. Second, the Saudi royal family is a dictatorship that earnestly fears unrest, and uses executions as one of several tools to stifle dissent or grassroots organizing.

That first point, though, may be the most important. The Saudi monarchy sees itself as stuck between a powerful, ultra-conservative clerical establishment on one side and the practical realities of running a modern country on the other. Public beheadings are a means for the Saudi rulers perpetuate Wahhabist control over religious matters, and thus preempt Wahhabist opposition to the monarchy's modest modernizations and pro-Western foreign policy.

This tension has long defined the country: in 1979, religious extremists seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca, demanding the overthrow of the Saudi monarchy for betraying ultra-conservative Islamist ideals. The siege, which killed more than 200 people, led the Saudis to try to prevent future attacks by co-opting radical Islam where it could — to be more extremist than the extremists.

In 1991, when elements of the Saudi clerical establishment [practically revolted](#) over the monarchy allowing US troops to temporarily base there, the monarchy again responded by co-opting the extremists, encouraging them to fund jihadists abroad rather than make trouble at home.

Public beheadings are one way the Saudis do this. The monarchy has given little indication that it considers human rights a priority, so it has been seemingly quite willing to trade them away.

In return, the religious establishment has rewarded the monarchy with loyalty that has been crucial to keeping the Saudis in power. "In every crisis the regime has faced since the founding of the modern Saudi state," Texas A&M's [F. Gregory Gause writes](#), "the Wahhabi clerics holding high positions in the state religious hierarchy have rallied to the colors."

Even when it comes to something like commercial law, where the haphazard nature of Sharia law does [actual harm to the Saudi economy](#) and thus the regime's coffers, the monarchy has been [hesitant](#) to try to reform the religious courts.

"This situation puts Saudi Arabia at odds with the rest of the Arab world, where modernizing governments have steadily hemmed in religious courts," Dickinson College historian [David Commins](#) writes. "It appears as though the Saudi rulers lack the confidence to challenge directly the Wahhabi ulama, perhaps from a sense that the dynasty's claim to legitimacy is questionable."

And don't expect an end to beheadings soon. The Wahhabi establishment, and its harsh vision of criminal law, are deeply embedded in the Saudi state, and seen by the monarchy as essential for keeping itself in power. The numbers bear that out: according to Amnesty, Saudi Arabia executed more people in 2014 than it had in any of the past three years.

A resolution of the European Parliament calls for the release of Raif Badawi and his lawyer

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l

HRWF (16.02.2015) - On 12th February, the European Parliament adopted a resolution strongly condemning the flogging of Raif Badawi as a cruel and shocking act by the Saudi Arabian authorities. It called on the Saudi authorities to put a stop to any further flogging

of Raif Badawi and to release him immediately and unconditionally, as he is considered a prisoner of conscience, detained and sentenced solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression.

Raif Badawi, a blogger and human rights activist, was charged with apostasy and sentenced by the Criminal Court of Jeddah in May 2014 to 10 years in prison, 1 000 lashes and a fine of SAR 1 million (EUR 228 000) after creating the website 'Free Saudi Liberals Network' for social, political and religious debate which was deemed to be an insult to Islam. The sentence also banned Mr Badawi from using any media outlets and from travelling abroad for 10 years after his release from prison. On 9th January 2015, Mr Badawi received his first set of 50 lashes in front of the al-Jafali mosque in Jeddah, resulting in wounds so profound that when he was taken to a prison clinic for a medical check-up, it was found by the doctors that he would not be able to withstand another round of lashes.

The resolution condemns firmly all forms of corporal punishment as unacceptable and degrading treatment contrary to human dignity and voices concern about states' use of flogging, strongly calling for its strict abolition. It calls on the Saudi authorities to respect the prohibition of torture, as is most notably enshrined in the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which Saudi Arabia has signed and ratified and it also calls on Saudi Arabia to sign the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Human rights defenders and activists

The resolution also calls on the Saudi authorities to release unconditionally Raif Badawi's lawyer, Waleed Abu al-Khair, who was sentenced on 6th July 2014 by the Specialised Criminal Court to 15 years in prison, to be followed by a 15-year travel ban, after setting up the human rights organisation 'Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia'.

Saudi Arabia has a lively community of online activists and the highest number of Twitter users in the Middle East. However, the internet is heavily censored, with thousands of websites being blocked and new blogs and websites needing a licence from the Ministry of Information.

The Saudi political and social system remains profoundly undemocratic, makes women and Shia Muslims second-class citizens, seriously discriminates against the country's large foreign workforce and severely represses all voices of dissent.

Public executions by beheading

The number and pace of executions are a matter of serious concern to the European Parliament. Over 87 people were executed in 2014, mostly by public beheading. At least 21 people have been executed since the beginning of 2015. 423 executions were reported between 2007 and 2012.

Saudi Arabia and the Islamic State (IS) prescribe near-identical punishments for a host of crimes, including the death penalty for blasphemy, murder, acts of homosexuality, theft or treason, death by stoning for adultery and the amputation of hands and feet for banditry.

Saudi Arabia plays a leading role in financing, disseminating and promoting worldwide a particularly extremist interpretation of Islam which has inspired terrorist organisations such as the so-called Islamic State and al-Qaeda.

In November 2013 Saudi Arabia was elected as a member of the UN Human Rights Council for a three-year period...

Saudi Arabia publicly beheads woman in holy Mecca as blogger lashings are postponed

The Independent (16.01.2015) - Authorities in Saudi Arabia have publicly beheaded a woman in Islam's holy city of Mecca, prompting further criticism of the country's human rights record.

Laila Bint Abdul Muttalib Basim, a Burmese woman who resided in Saudi Arabia, was executed by sword on Monday after being dragged through the street and held down by four police officers.

She was convicted of the sexual abuse and murder of her seven-year-old step-daughter.

A video showed how it took three blows to complete the execution, while the woman screamed "I did not kill. I did not kill." It has now been removed by YouTube as part of its policy on "shocking and disgusting content".

There are two ways to behead people according to Mohammed al-Saeedi, a human rights activist: "One way is to inject the prisoner with painkillers to numb the pain and the other is without the painkiller," he told the Middle East Eye.

"This woman was beheaded without painkillers – they wanted to make the pain more powerful for her."

The Saudi Ministry of the Interior said in a statement that it believed the sentence was warranted due to the severity of the crime.

The beheading is part of an alarming trend, which has seen the kingdom execute seven people in the first two weeks of this year. In 2014 the number of executions rose to 87, from 78 in 2013.

Raif Badawi, the Saudi blogger, was due to receive the second set of 50 lashes today for insulting Islam, but it has been postponed on medical grounds.

Ali A Rizvi, one of the blogger's best friends told The Independent: "His wife told me that the lashings have been postponed, but it is only temporary."

He was sentenced to 1,000 lashes and 10 years in prison after creating a liberal, secular website, Free Saudi Liberals. He faces lashings every Friday for the next 18 weeks, until the sentence is completed.

He narrowly avoided the death penalty when a court threw out apostasy charges in 2013.

Sarah Leah Wilson, the Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch, said: "Corporal punishment is nothing new in Saudi Arabia, but publicly lashing a peaceful activist merely for expressing his ideas sends an ugly message of intolerance.

"Saudi Arabia is showing a willingness to inflict vicious and cruel punishments on writers whose views it rejects."

Amnesty also condemned the sentence and has launched a campaign to release the blogger.

In Saudi Arabia a number of crimes, including murder, rape, adultery and armed robbery, can carry a capital sentence.

Beheading is considered one of the more humane punishments the authorities can mete out, a firing squad and stoning are other methods open to judges.

Global outrage at Saudi Arabia as jailed blogger receives public flogging

Kingdom stays silent as protesters contrast its opposition to Paris attacks on free speech with its own attacks on free speech

The Guardian (11.01.2014) - Saudi Arabia is remaining silent in the face of global outrage at the public flogging of the jailed blogger Raif Badawi, who received the first 50 of 1,000 lashes on Friday, part of his punishment for running a liberal website devoted to freedom of speech in the conservative kingdom.

Anger at the flogging – carried out as the world watched the bloody denouement of the Charlie Hebdo and Jewish supermarket jihadi killings in Paris – focused on a country that is a strategic ally, oil supplier and lucrative market for the US, Britain and other western countries but does not tolerate criticism at home.

Badawi was [shown on a YouTube video](#) being beaten in a square outside a mosque in Jeddah, watched by a crowd of several hundred who shouted “Allahu Akbar” (God is great) and clapped and whistled after the flogging ended. Badawi made no sound during the flogging and was able to walk back unaided afterwards.

“Raif was escorted from a bus and placed in the middle of the crowd, guarded by eight or nine officers,” a witness told Amnesty International.

“He was handcuffed and shackled but his face was not covered. A security officer approached him from behind with a huge cane and started beating him.

“Raif raised his head towards the sky, closing his eyes and arching his back. He was silent, but you could tell from his face and his body that he was in real pain.”

Badawi’s wife, Ensaf Haidar, told the Guardian from Montreal on Sunday: “Many governments around the world have protested about my husband’s case. I was optimistic until the last minute before the flogging. But the Saudi government is behaving like Daesh [a derogatory Arabic name for Islamic State or Isis].”

Saudi Arabia joined other Arab and Muslim countries in condemning the murder of 12 people at the Paris satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo but angry comments highlighted its double standard in meting out a cruel punishment to a man who was accused of insulting Islam.

[One cartoon circulating on social media](#) showed a man resembling Badawi being flogged alongside the words: "Saudi Arabia condemns the terrorist attack on freedom of expression in Paris ..." [Another image showed a pencil being flayed by whips.](#)

One woman at Sunday's Paris solidarity rally carried a placard declaring: "I am Raif Badawi, the Saudi journalist who was flogged." Others protested at the presence of the Saudi foreign minister.

Badawi was sentenced last May to 10 years' imprisonment and 1,000 lashes – 50 at a time over 20 weeks – and fined 1m Saudi riyals (£175,000). He has been held since mid-2012, and his Free Saudi Liberals website, established to encourage debate on religious and political matters in Saudi Arabia, is closed.

He is expected to receive another 50 lashes this Friday.

Arabic Twitter users condemned Saudi Arabia for behaving like Isis – part of the argument that the fundamental values promoted by the Saudi state do not differ from those that are carried to a brutal extreme by the jihadi group that controls parts of Syria and Iraq.

"Just a reminder," tweeted one Tunisian woman. "Those who criticise Isis, which beheads and flogs people, and lines up children to watch, are the ones who are making excuses for the flogging of a man in Saudi Arabia. They are all Isis."

Saudi Arabia is one of five Arab countries in the US-led coalition fighting Isis. It has arrested hundreds of people for alleged links to terrorism and imposed penalties on those travelling abroad to fight – though it still wants the overthrow of the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad.

About 2,500 Saudis have fought with Isis.

The US, EU and others publicly urged Riyadh not to go ahead with the flogging. Britain's Foreign Office said: "The UK condemns the use of cruel and degrading punishment in all circumstances."

A spokesman said on Sunday that concerns about the case continued to be expressed "at all levels". There is no sign that the Saudis' western allies will take any punitive action to back up their protests.

"The Saudis have a policy for inside the country where they want to show that they are pious and protect the faith," said Ali al-Ahmed, of the Washington-based Institute for Gulf Affairs.

"Outside they project the opposite impression, that they are liberals and that it's ordinary people who are savage and conservative.

"That's why the west says: 'Yes, we need to protect the Saudi royals because the alternative is Osama bin Laden.'

"It's worked for the Saudis and it gives the west an excuse not to support any kind of change or reform."

Badawi's punishment is part of a wider campaign against domestic dissent. His lawyer, Waleed Abu al-Khair, was sentenced to 15 years in prison last July because of criticism of human rights abuses.

His case resumes on Monday, with the government reportedly seeking an even harsher sentence.

Fadhil al-Manasif is facing 14 years in prison on charges stemming from his assistance to journalists covering protests over the treatment of Shia Muslims in the Sunni-dominated country.

Case of 2 Saudi women drivers referred to terrorism court

AP - Two Saudi women detained for nearly a month in defiance of a ban on females driving were referred on Thursday to a court established to try terrorism cases, several people close to the defendants said.

The cases of the two, Loujain al-Hathloul and Maysa al-Amoudi, were sent to the anti-terrorism court in connection to opinions they expressed in tweets and in social media, four people close to the two women told The Associated Press.

They did not elaborate on the specific charges or what the opinions were. Both women have spoken out online against the female driving ban. Activists say they fear the case is intended to send a warning to others pushing for greater rights. The four people spoke on condition of anonymity because of fear of government reprisals.

The Specialized Criminal Court, to which their cases were referred, was established in the capital Riyadh to try terrorism cases but has also tried and handed long prison sentences to a number of human rights workers, peaceful dissidents, activists and critics of the government. For example, this year it sentenced a revered Shiite cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a vocal critic of the government, to death for sedition and sentenced a prominent human rights lawyer, Waleed Abul-Khair, to 15 years in prison on charges of inciting public opinion.

Human Rights Watch recently warned that "Saudi authorities are ramping up their crackdown on people who peacefully criticize the government on the Internet." It said that judges and prosecutors are using "vague provisions of a 2007 anti-cybercrime law to charge and try Saudi citizens for peaceful tweets and social media comments."

This was the first time women drivers have been referred to the court, activists said.

The detention of al-Hathloul, 25, and Maysa al-Amoudi, 33 — both arrested on Dec. 1 — has been the longest yet for any women who defied the driving ban. They were vocal supporters of a grassroots campaign launched last year to oppose the ban, and have a significant online following with a total 355,000 followers on Twitter for the two of them at the time of their arrest.

Though no formal law bans women from driving in Saudi Arabia, ultraconservative Saudi clerics have issued religious edicts forbidding women from taking the wheel, and authorities do not issue them driver's licenses. No such ban exists anywhere else in the world, even in other conservative Gulf countries.

The four people close to the women said their lawyers appealed the judge's decision to transfer their cases. An appeals court in Dammam, the capital of Eastern Province, is expected to decide on the referral in the coming days, they said.

Authorities have a history of clamping down on Saudi women who attempt to drive. In 1990, 50 women were arrested for driving. They had their passports confiscated and lost their jobs. More than 20 years later, a woman was sentenced in 2011 to 10 lashes for driving, though the king overturned the sentence.

Supporters of the current driving campaign delivered a petition to the royal court this month asking King Abdullah to pardon the two women.

Organizers behind the campaign, which began Oct. 26, 2013, say the ban on women driving underpins wider issues related to guardianship laws in Saudi Arabia that give men powerful sway over women's lives. One activist said the driving ban is also part of "a wider effort to quash any chances of raising the ceiling on civil liberties" in Saudi Arabia.

The two women appeared in court on Thursday for the second time in the eastern al-Ahsa region, where they were detained after driving to Saudi Arabia from the United Arab Emirates.

Al-Hathloul was stopped by border guards and her passport was confiscated for more than 24 hours when she attempted to cross the border Nov. 30 with a UAE driver's license in an act of defiance.

Al-Amoudi, a UAE-based Saudi journalist, was stopped when she went to deliver food and a blanket to al-Hathloul at the border, activists and relatives said. The women were formally arrested on Dec. 1.

There has been no official Saudi comment on the arrests.

Al-Hathloul is in a correctional facility for juveniles and al-Amoudi is in a prison. Relatives say they have been allowed to see them for short supervised visits.

Saudi woman 'arrested' for driving

Al Jazeera (01.12.2014) - A woman who tried to drive in defiance of a ban on women drivers in Saudi Arabia has been arrested after being blocked at the border with the United Arab Emirates for a day, activists said along with many users on social media.

Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world which does not allow women to drive.

"I have been at the Saudi border for 24 hours. They don't want to give me my passport nor will they let me pass," Loujain Hathloul said in a tweet at around midday, before tweets from **@LoujainHathloul** stopped.

Activists said she was arrested on Monday afternoon, but the interior ministry could not immediately comment on her case.

Another woman, UAE-based Saudi journalist Maysaa Alamoudi, who went to support her, was also arrested, an activist told the AFP news agency.

"They transferred her and Maysaa... to the bureau of investigation" at a Saudi police station, said the activist who asked for anonymity.

Both women's phones rang unanswered. Border officers blocked Hathloul because she was driving, activists said.

She said her driving licence "is valid in all GCC countries", a reference to the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council which includes Saudi Arabia.

Hathloul also posted details about her long confinement in her car.

Social media reaction

Once her tweets stopped, users and activists took to Twitter to express worry and gather information.

Journalists like Ahmed Al Omran tweeted that the October 26 driving campaign had said the women were at a prison while Mohammed Jamjoom said he was trying to reach officials for a confirmation.

Another Saudi writer and activist, Hala Al-Dosari tweeted that the two women had been transferred to the general bureau of interrogation.

The other activist who spoke to AFP said Hathloul was trying to make a point in her unusual attempt to drive through the border.

"She knew that they wouldn't let her pass," the activist said.

During October dozens of women drove in Saudi Arabia and posted images of themselves doing so as part of an online campaign supporting the right to drive.

In response, the interior ministry said it would "strictly implement" measures against anyone undermining "the social cohesion".

Women drivers have previously been arrested and cars have been confiscated, activists say.

Saudi Arabia steps up beheadings, some see political message

Times of India (20.10.2014) <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/middle-east/Saudi-Arabia-steps-up-beheadings-some-see-political-message/articleshow/44889562.cms> - Immediately after his sword falls, the Saudi Arabian executioner steps backwards to avoid soiling his clothes with the blood of the condemned man, whose headless body can be seen slumping over backwards in the shaky online film.

After perfunctorily checking the white folds of his robe for flecks of red, the executioner wipes his blade with a tissue, which he drops onto the corpse and walks away.

A sudden surge in public executions in Saudi Arabia in the last two months has coincided with a US-led bombing campaign against Islamic State. This has led to inevitable comparisons in Western media between Islamic State's beheadings and those practiced in Saudi Arabia.

Defenders of the Saudi death penalty say beheadings, usually with a single sword stroke, are at least as humane as lethal injections in the United States. They deplore any comparison between the kingdom's execution of convicted criminals and Islamic State's extra-judicial killing of innocent hostages.

But rights activists say they are more concerned by the justice system behind the death penalty in the kingdom than by its particular method of execution. And critics of the Al Saud ruling family say the latest wave of executions may have a political message, with Riyadh determined to demonstrate its toughness at a moment of regional turmoil.

Saudi Arabia beheaded 26 people in August, more than in the first seven months of the year combined. The total for the year now stands at 59, compared to 69 for all of last year, according to Human Rights Watch.

"It's possible the executions were used as intimidation and flexing of muscles. It's a very volatile time and executions do serve a purpose when they're done en masse," said Madawi al-Rasheed, visiting professor at the Middle East Centre of the London School of Economics.

"There's uncertainty around Saudi Arabia from the north and from the south and inside they are taking aggressive action alongside the US against Islamic State, and all that is creating some kind of upheaval, which the death penalty tries to keep a lid on."

A spokesman for Saudi Arabia's justice ministry was not immediately available to explain the upsurge in executions in August, or to answer other questions about the kingdom's use of the death penalty.

'Particularly egregious'

Whatever the reason for the timing, the wave of executions at the same time as jihadis in Iraq and Syria were beheading captives has brought new scrutiny to the practices of a country whose values are so different from those of its Western allies.

While Saudi Arabia has joined US-led air strikes against Islamic State in Syria and has deployed its senior clergy to denounce militant ideology, its public beheading of convicts, particularly for non-violent or victimless crimes like adultery, apostasy and witchcraft, is anathema to Western allies.

"Any execution is appalling, but executions for crimes such as drug smuggling or sorcery that result in no loss of life are particularly egregious," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director for Human Rights Watch.

Some diplomats have said the increase may be only a quirk of timing, as the appointment of more judges has allowed courts to clear a backlog of appeal cases, and as the rise began after the end of Ramadan, when fewer executions traditionally occur.

But the interpretation of it as a show of strength appeared to be reinforced last week by the sentencing to death of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a member of the Sunni-ruled kingdom's Shi'ite minority who had backed protests in 2011.

Two other men, one of whom was younger than 18 at the time of the protests, have also been sentenced for their part in the demonstrations and were convicted of having thrown petrol bombs.

"If you look at the definition of what Nimr was sentenced for, instigating sedition, it shows they want to make sure they stop any form of activism," said Mai Yamani, a Saudi-born political analyst in London.

More than a dozen people convicted of terrorism or Sunni Islamist militancy have also been sentenced to death this year.

Black magic, adultery and apostasy

Under the Saudi Sharia legal system it can actually be harder to avert execution for crimes without a specific victim, like drug smuggling, than for murder.

Of the 59 people executed by Oct. 16, 22 had been convicted for smuggling drugs, according to figures compiled by [Human Rights Watch](#) from Saudi media reports.

One Saudi man, Mohammed Bakr al-Alaawi, was put to death for sorcery so far this year, the third such case since 2011. Although such cases are even rarer, judges can also demand execution for adulterers or Muslims who abandon their faith.

In Saudi Islamic law, charges of violent crimes like murder are usually brought under the system of "qisas": retaliation on the principle of an eye for an eye.

While a murderer would normally be sentenced to death, the victim's family is permitted to accept "diyya", or blood money, instead of execution. The lives of women are worth half those of men, and non-Muslims a fraction of the value of Muslims.

Convicts from less wealthy backgrounds, or without tribal connections who might intercede with the family or tribe of the victim, are more likely to die because it is harder for them to arrange a blood money payment.

For other crimes, the punishment is usually up to the judge, employing his own interpretation of ancient Muslim texts. When there is no victim, there is no victim's family to offer mercy at a price. Saudi Arabia has no civil penal code that sets out sentencing rules, and no system of judicial precedent that would make the outcome of cases predictable based on past practice.

Bassim Alim, who defended 17 men who were sentenced to up to 30 years jail in 2011 for sedition and other crimes in a high profile political case, said judges saw no need for many protections seen as fundamental in the west, like ensuring defendants had legal representation.

"The judge actually told one of the accused to my face: 'Why do you need a lawyer? You don't need a lawyer'," he said.

Alim said capital convictions were often based on no evidence other than a confession, with judges under no obligation to consider mitigating circumstances, psychological factors or the possibility that a confession was coerced.

Reform stalled

King Abdullah announced plans for legal reform in 2007, but judges, drawn from the traditionally conservative clergy, have so far succeeded in putting off meaningful change.

In 2009 Abdullah replaced the long-serving, conservative justice minister with a younger scholar, Mohammed al-Issa. His attempts to introduce more modern training for judges and a system of precedent to make sentencing more predictable have so far been blocked by strenuous opposition from conservatives.

Even Saudis who want reform generally do not oppose the use of the death penalty by public beheading. Khalid al-Dakheel, a political sociology professor in Riyadh, said the turbulence in the region meant people wanted the justice system to be tough.

"You don't want to have a dictatorship similar to that of Bashar al-Assad in Syria or (former Iraqi leader) Saddam Hussein. But at the same time you don't want to have a government which is weak, especially in such a region and at such a time," he said.

In the most extreme version of the Saudi death penalty, known by the Arabic word for "crucifixion" and reserved for crimes that outrage Saudi society, the corpse is publicly hanged in a harness from a metal gibbet as a warning to others.

An online film dated April 2012 on the LiveLeaks website shows a man being executed and then "crucified" in this manner, reportedly for robbing a house and killing its occupants. A group of five men suffered this fate in May last year in the southern province of Jizan for a series of robberies.

The reformist Jeddah lawyer, Alim, said he supported capital punishment in Saudi Arabia but that the legal system needed to be strengthened to ensure verdicts were just.

"I'm not someone who shies away from it. It's part of Sharia. But it has to be handled with extreme sensitivity and care. At the moment it can be done on the basis of no other evidence if the accused confesses," he said.

Saudi religious police in rare apology after Briton beating

AFP (03.09.14) <http://www.france24.com/en/20140903-saudi-religious-police-rare-apology-after-briton-beating/> - Saudi Arabia's religious police issued a rare apology Wednesday after members roughed up a British resident of Riyadh over paying at a women-only cash desk.

The Commission of the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, known unofficially as Mutawaa, also vowed to punish the assailants, after an investigation prompted by a YouTube video showing members attacking the man and his Saudi wife.

The video showed a commission agent jump out of his car and attack the Briton and a woman in black abaya cloak outside a supermarket.

The commission said in a statement that the investigation proved its patrol had violated instructions and "escalated" the incident after members spotted the man paying at a female-only cash desk.

Only women are allowed to pay at female-only cash desks in the kingdom. A man accompanied by female family members can stop at such desks so long as a woman deals with the cashier.

The commission said the patrol "had no authority" to question the man's right to pay at the desk, especially after it was clear that his wife was accompanying him, adding that mall security should handle such a situation.

"The commission apologises to the resident and his wife," it said, insisting the act was an "isolated" incident.

It said that four members involved in the attack were pulled from the patrols service and posted to desk positions in areas outside the capital.

Local press said the Briton is a convert to Islam, a longtime resident of the kingdom and married to a Saudi woman.

Commission members enforce a strict segregation of the sexes and have traditionally forced women to cover from head-to-toe when in public.

They also patrol shops to make sure they are shuttered during prayer times.

Saudi Arabia: 12,000 Somalis expelled

Mass Deportations without Considering Refugee Claims

HRW (18.02.2014) – Saudi authorities have deported more than 12,000 people to Somalia since January 1, 2014, including hundreds of women and children, without allowing any to make refugee claims. Saudi Arabia should end the summary deportations, which risk violating its international obligations not to return anyone to a place where their life or freedom is threatened or where they face other serious harm.

Seven Somalis recently deported from Saudi Arabia told Human Rights Watch researchers in Mogadishu, the Somali capital, that the Saudi authorities had detained them for weeks in appalling conditions and some said Saudi security personnel beat them. None had been allowed to speak with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to discuss possible refugee claims before being deported. UNHCR said in mid-January that “south central Somalia is a very dangerous place.” UNHCR also said the Saudi authorities have denied its staff access to detained Somalis in the country.

“The Saudi authorities have deported thousands of men, women, and children to conflict-ridden Somalia, while denying them any chance to seek asylum,” said Gerry Simpson, senior refugee researcher. “Saudi Arabia should allow anyone fearing serious ill-treatment at home to claim refugee status, with help from the UN, if needed.”

The head of Somalia’s Immigration and Naturalization Services told Human Rights Watch researchers on February 3 that Saudi Arabia had deported 12,332 Somalis to Mogadishu since January 1. According to UNHCR, a number of the deportees are not only from Mogadishu but also from other parts of south-central Somalia.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) says the Somali Interior Ministry expects Saudi Arabia to deport another 30,000 in the coming weeks. The deportations are part of a Saudi campaign to remove undocumented foreign workers.

Saudi Arabia should immediately introduce procedures allowing refugees, including those from Somalia, to seek asylum or other forms of protection. Children should not be detained because of their immigration status, and unaccompanied children – those traveling alone without caregivers – should not be held with unrelated adults. If Saudi Arabia identifies anyone at risk of harm in Somalia the authorities should give them secure legal status and should work closely with UNHCR, if needed. It should also urgently improve detention conditions for people waiting to be deported, and only detain as necessary and proportional to that need.

The deported Somalis Human Rights Watch interviewed described severe overcrowding, lack of access to air and daylight, sweltering heat, and limited medical assistance in Saudi detention centers as they awaited deportation. All complained about the quality and quantity of the food. One deportee said prison guards beat him repeatedly, and

another saw guards beating detainees who complained about conditions. With one exception, none of the detention centers had bedding and detainees slept on the floor.

Somalis said that beatings and other abusive treatment continued during the deportation process. A woman in her ninth month of pregnancy, Sadiyo, who was arrested and deported separately from her husband, told Human Rights Watch that a Saudi policewoman beat her on the back with a baton while she stood in line at Jeddah airport. She went into labor and gave birth on the cabin floor of the plane as it flew to Mogadishu.

"Saudi authorities should investigate allegations of abuse in detention and during deportation," Simpson said. "The government should immediately improve its dreadful detention facilities."

One deported Somali, Mohammed, said Saudi authorities detained him in five detention facilities for a total of 57 days before deporting him.

"In the first detention center in Riyadh [the Saudi capital], there was so little food, we fought over it so the strongest ate the most," he said. "Guards told us to face the wall and then beat our backs with metal rods. In the second place, there were two toilets for 1,200 people, including dozens of children."

The deportees may risk life-threatening situations or inhuman and degrading conditions in south-central Somalia. In Mogadishu, approximately 370,000 displaced people live in dire conditions in camps for people who have fled famine and violence elsewhere in the country, with inadequate security. Fighting continues in many parts of south-central Somalia. The Islamist armed group al-Shabaab still forcibly recruits adults and children.

Al-Shabaab bombings and other attacks in Mogadishu frequently target or otherwise kill and wound civilians. On February 13, al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for a car bombing that day outside Mogadishu's airport, apparently targeting a UN convoy that killed at least six people.

Customary international law prohibits *refoulement*, the return of anyone to a place where their life or freedom would be threatened or where they would face persecution, torture, or inhuman or degrading treatment. On January 17, UNHCR issued guidelines on returns to Somalia and called on countries not to return anyone before interviewing them and ensuring they do not face the threat of persecution or other serious harm if returned. Both UNHCR and IOM say that Saudi Arabia has not made any such determination before sending the Somalis back.

"Somalia is still wracked by violence that kills and maims civilians, while hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people are barely surviving in insecure camps," Simpson said. "Saudi Arabia and other countries where Somalis are living should closely examine any refugee claims and other claims for protection Somalis may have."

Saudi Arabia has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and does not have an asylum system. UNHCR, which has a small office in Riyadh, is not allowed to receive and review refugee claims, a process known as "Refugee Status Determination." The Saudi authorities have no other procedures allowing Somalis or others who fear persecution or other harm in their home countries to seek protection in Saudi Arabia.

Major donors to UNHCR, including the European Union and the United States, should press Saudi Arabia to end its deportations of Somalis.

"The Saudi government is entitled to promote employment opportunities for its own citizens, but it needs to make sure it's not sending people back to a life-threatening

situation," Simpson said. "Saudi Arabia has no excuse for not offering protection to some of the world's most vulnerable people."

Somalis Describe Detention Conditions in Saudi Arabia

Several of the deportees who spoke to Human Rights Watch researchers said they developed chronic health problems in detention in Saudi, including persistent coughing. Some said they saw children detained with their relatives and other adults. One said he was detained with approximately 30 children who were in their young teens and who had no caregiver.

A health worker in Mogadishu told Human Rights Watch that she attended a one-year-old boy in a Mogadishu hospital for several weeks. The baby had been detained with his father for a month before being deported and was suffering from diarrhea, malnutrition, and anemia.

Saladu, 35, said the Saudi authorities detained her for nine days with her two children, ages seven and nine, and her sister's three children before deporting them: "The room we stayed in with 150 other women and children was extremely hot and there was no air conditioning. The children were sick. My son was vomiting and his stomach was very bloated. There were no mattresses, people just slept on the floor."

IOM publicly said that many of the deportees are in poor health because of their prolonged detention in substandard conditions before they were deported. Some had suffered physical and psychological trauma or had respiratory illnesses, including pneumonia. IOM noted that "a significant number may have been subjected to ill-treatment."

An IOM representative told Human Rights Watch that it plans to set up a facility at Mogadishu's Aden Adde airport to provide emergency medical assistance, non-food items such as blankets, and water to deportees, though the services had not begun as of February 17. UNHCR told Human Rights Watch that its staff would be working with IOM to identify those at greatest risk of harm in Somalia.

Deportations of Undocumented Migrants in Saudi Arabia

The mass deportations of Somalis in January followed Saudi Arabia's deportation of at least 12,000 Somalis to Mogadishu in 2013 and thousands of others in 2012, according to UNHCR.

In November, Saudi officials resumed a campaign that had started in April but had been suspended shortly thereafter, to locate and deport foreign workers considered to be violating local labor laws, including workers from Somalia, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, the Philippines, Nepal, Pakistan, and Yemen. The Saudi Interior Ministry announced on January 21 that it had deported more than 250,000 people since November.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 42 Yemeni workers deported from Saudi Arabia in November whose descriptions of detention conditions were similar to those of the Somali deportees. Most said there was overcrowding and insufficient food and drinkable water, and reported frequent beatings by prison guards. Five Ethiopian nationals told Human Rights Watch in November that thousands of foreign workers in Riyadh were held in makeshift detention facilities without adequate food and shelter before being deported.

Violence in Somalia

On January 17, UNHCR issued guidelines for factors countries should consider when assessing refugee claims by Somali nationals or other claims for protection based on

international human rights law. On January 28, UNHCR issued a news release about the guidelines, appealing to all governments "to uphold their obligations" not to forcibly return anyone to Somalia unless they are convinced the person would not suffer persecution or other serious harm upon return.

UNHCR said that southern and central Somalia "remains a very dangerous place" and that it "consider[s] the options for Somalis to find protection from persecution or serious harm within Southern and Central Somalia to be limited." The agency said that this "is especially true for large areas that remain under the control of Al-Shabaab," which "prohibits the exercise of various types of freedoms and rights, especially affecting women" and uses "public whipping, amputation ... and beheadings" as punishment.

UNHCR also said al-Shabaab attacks in Mogadishu that killed civilians had increased in 2013 and that the Somali authorities are "reported to be failing to provide much of [the] population with basic security."

Human Rights Watch has also documented serious abuses by al-Shabaab against civilians, including forced recruitment of children and attacks on people perceived to support the Somali government. The armed group has targeted students, teachers, and school buildings and used schools as firing positions and the students inside as "human shields."

In March 2013 Human Rights Watch reported on sexual violence and other abuses against displaced persons living in Mogadishu's internally displaced persons camps.

In January 2013 the Somali government announced plans to relocate tens of thousands of displaced people in Mogadishu. These plans stalled primarily due to the government's inability to provide basic protection in the planned relocation sites. According to UNHCR, almost 60,000 people were displaced in Somalia in the first nine months of 2013, bringing the total number of displaced to 1.1 million.

A February 13, 2014, Human Rights Watch report documents high levels of rape and sexual abuse against women and girls in Mogadishu in 2013, particularly among displaced women who are attacked inside and near camps for displaced people.

In November UNHCR, Kenya, and Somalia signed a tri-partite agreement setting out procedures to be followed to assist Somalis wishing to return to Somalia. The agreement emphasized that the principle of nonrefoulement needed to be scrupulously respected. UNHCR's January news release said neither the agreement nor UNHCR's possible future assistance to help reintegrate voluntarily returning Somali nationals from Kenya should in any way imply that UNHCR believes that Somalia is safe for everyone. The agency reported that 42,000 Somalis fled their country to seek asylum worldwide in 2013.

'Saudi women cannot go to male doctors alone,' says cleric

Top cleric says women 'are becoming negligent' by consulting doctors without a male guardian

Gulf News (13.02.2014) - A top Saudi cleric has scolded women who visit male doctors without being accompanied by a male guardian, claiming that is prohibited by Islam, *Al Hayat* daily reported on Thursday.

His remarks follow the death of a university student last week after paramedics were denied access to her campus because they were not accompanied by a male guardian, or close relative, a must according to the strict segregation rules in the Muslim kingdom.

"Women are becoming negligent in consulting doctors without a mahram (male guardian), and this is prohibited," *Al Hayat* quoted Shaikh Qays Al Mubarak, a member of the Council of Senior Ulema (Muslim scholars), as saying.

A medical check-up could include "a woman showing parts of her body to a doctor. This is not permissible ... unless urgent," he said.

Women "must seek help from a male doctor only when a female medic is not available. When this happens, they must not be alone and the doctor must only look at the pain" part of the body, he said.

The Council of Senior Ulema is the highest religious authority in the ultraconservative kingdom.

Al Hayat said the religious police in Eastern Province have enforced restrictions on women entering several private medical centres without a male guardian.

"Members of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice have entered a health and diet centre and prevented women from consulting a male dietitian without the presence of a mahram," *Al Hayat* reported, referring to the religious police.

AFP could not immediately verify these allegations.

In 2002, 15 girls died after a fire broke out at their school in the holy city of Makkah and religious police blocked their evacuation because they were not dressed in keeping with Islamic codes.

Witnesses said male civil defence workers were kept at bay because, in their haste to escape the flames, the 12-to-14-year-olds had not put on their black abaya.

Saudi Arabia imposes a strict interpretation of Islamic laws, notably a segregation of the sexes, and does not allow women to work or travel without the authorisation of a male guardian from her family. It is also the only country in the world that bans women from driving.

Saudi Valentines defy the love police

Hussain's shop window may be blooming with white, orange and violet, but he still has the real thing – red roses – out the back

Gulf News (15.02.2014) - Riyadh: Red roses lurk hidden in flower shop back rooms and heart-shaped chocolates are sold under the counter, but Saudis still manage to buy Valentine's gifts and defy the religious police.

Florist Hussain came up with a simple solution to a ban on red tokens of love: he filled his window with white roses, orange irises and violet hydrangeas.

"I've hidden everything red in the shop, so when a religious police patrol comes along, they find nothing to complain about," he said.

Anti-Valentine's Day patrols by the Muttawa religious police — formally known as the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice — started on Wednesday.

They began entering premises stocking chocolates, flowers and souvenirs to warn proprietors against selling anything red or heart-shaped and linked to the annual “infidel celebration” of matters romantic.

In Saudi Arabia sexes are strictly segregated and any public display of affection is completely taboo.

Hussain’s shop window may be blooming with white, orange and violet, but he still has the real thing — red roses — out the back.

“I’ve sold at least 350 red roses at 20 riyals [Dh20] a pop,” he said.

“Many women call us on the phone to order roses, because they fear the religious police.”

Kumar, another florist, was persuaded by a Muttawa visit not even to consider flouting the Valentine’s Day ban, however.

“We’re going to sell these to a chocolate shop,” he said, pointing to bouquets of red flowers in a back room of his store.

Confectioners do have chocolate hearts for discreet sale, but only to the right people.

“Of course we have them, but the religious police came by and warned us against selling them,” said one chocolate shop owner who asked not to be identified.

‘It’s only chocolate!’

“We hid them because we don’t want any problems,” he added, smiling, indicating that an illicit transaction involving the chocolate contraband would be more than acceptable.

In another shop in a commercial district of the capital, an Egyptian employee said the religious police had told them not to sell heart-shaped chocolate or sweets wrapped in red paper.

One man browsing in the shop was clearly unhappy: “Why are they forbidden? It’s only chocolate!” he complained.

Another customer — an older man — shot him a dark look.

Only a liberal fringe of Saudis actually celebrates Valentine’s Day in an ultraconservative society in which clerics and their pronouncements are widely respected.

One of the most popular, Mohammed Al Oraifi, this year took to Twitter where he has hundreds of thousands of followers, decreeing that those in the kingdom who celebrate Valentine’s Day “want to copy the infidels”.

However, not everywhere in Saudi Arabia is the ban strictly enforced.

In the Red Sea port of Jeddah, the country’s commercial capital in the west, a more liberal attitude towards the lovers’ festival can be noted.

This year, some florists have been openly selling red roses, and are unafraid to give their names.

“The religious police didn’t come. We’re doing nothing wrong anyway,” said Abu Zakaria, who runs a flower shop in the north of the city.

Another man, Thamer Hussain, said some people with romantic yearnings marked the Valentine’s festival a day in advance, to ensure the experience was hassle-free.

“Some young people celebrated St Valentine’s Day on Wednesday evening, with small parties and exchanges of gifts,” he said.

In this way they managed to avoid the attentions of the Muttawa, who are expected to perform their duties religiously on Friday, ensuring that for unmarried couples a quick canoodle is definitely unacceptable.

Saudi women celebrate: Monitoring system of cross-border movements suspended

RT (15.01.2014) - Saudi Arabia has suspended an electronic system to notify male guardians about the departure or arrival of their female relatives. Local women complained the system was humiliating and suggested introducing a similar one for their husbands.

"The system has been suspended due to some observations and it will undergo amendment," spokesperson of the Passports Department, Lt. Col. Ahmad Al-Laheedan, said, indicating that the old rules could be revamped, and some new options added.

Under the current system, an SMS is sent to the male guardian each time his female family member or a child crosses the Kingdom's border.

"In the past, the system included all the names that were registered. However, in the next phase, it will be optional. The amendments seek to enhance the system to make it better and fulfill all its objectives," Al-Laheedan said.

A number of Saudi women argue that the notification process should have never been introduced in the first place, because it is *"humiliating for women"* and pushes them into the same category as children.

"Women like myself who may have open permission from their guardian to travel find the issue particularly ridiculous because our guardians are notified of our every move as if we are children that need to be tethered to become responsible adults," a Saudi columnist and Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences, Sabria S. Jawhar, told Arab News.

"I hope this is a step toward canceling the whole system. We are born Muslim and we know the principles of our religion. There is no need for anyone, including the government, to monitor our behavior," she stressed.

A managing editor of the OIC Journal (The Organization of Islamic Cooperation) has also supported the move to cancel the system, saying it was disrespectful of women's rights.

"All Saudi women travel abroad with the permission of their parents or husbands. The system gives the impression that women require constant monitoring. It also shows that women cannot be trusted," Maha Akeel said.

A number of Saudis have approved the system, however, saying it really helped families with awareness of the cross-border movements of their dependents.

"Without such a system, a woman or a child would be free to come and go and travel abroad without her or his family knowing about it," one Saudi blogger said, quoted by arabnews.com. *"If such is the case, we will find many of our women and children going abroad without our knowledge,"* he pointed out.

If the main objective of the notification system is indeed to provide a useful service for all members of the families, men should also "join the club," Saudi women suggested.

"I am sure that many problems will be solved if women were aware of their husbands' cross-border movements as well," Gulfnews.com quoted one blogger, Salwa, as saying. "In fact, women would benefit from the system much more than men. So please include them and alert their wives about their international departures and arrivals," she added.

Every adult woman in Saudi Arabia is required to have a close male relative as her 'guardian', authorized to make key decisions on her behalf, including the right to travel, to start a business, and study at university. Saudi women are prohibited from driving, and are required to cover themselves in public, among other restrictions.

As a rule, women in the ultra-conservative Kingdom of Saudi Arabia maintain a traditional place inside the household. Many issues in their quiet lives are strictly regulated by Sharia law, derived from the Koran.

Earlier this month the country's first female law firm has opened its doors to protect women's rights in Saudi Arabia. The move came two months after the company's founder, along with three other female lawyers, were granted licenses to practice law in the traditionally patriarchal kingdom.

The first female Saudi lawyer, [Bayan Mahmoud Al Zahran](#), who set up her all-woman law firm in Jeddah, said she would fight for the rights of Saudi women and relate women's cases to the court, a task which her male counterparts cannot handle at times.

Saudi Arabia: 58,615 foreigners abscond in one year

Gulf News (25.12.2013) - More than 58,000 domestic helpers and drivers have absconded from work in one year in Saudi Arabia, figures indicate.

According to statistics compiled by the labour ministry, 31,700 domestic helpers ran away from the homes of their employers. Recruitment agencies estimate that the absconding caused families losses of around SR300 million.

The helpers constituted 54 per cent of the 58,615 foreigners who left without informing their employers. The other 46 per cent were drivers, local Arabic daily *Al Eqtisadiya* reported on Wednesday.

The capital Riyadh topped the list of the absconders, followed by the Eastern Province and the Makkah area. The lowest figures were in recorded in the northern part of the kingdom.

The ministry said that around 500,000 expatriates, including labourers, and representing around 6 per cent of the total labour force did not report to work last year.

Around 244,000 left Saudi Arabia, but opted not to return even though they had the necessary visas.

Several Saudi families have complained that the absconding phenomenon caused them serious concerns, saying that it often occurred after the three-month probation period.

After the three months, the recruitment agencies are no longer required to either recruit substitute helpers for the families or give them back the fees they had paid.

Several agents said that helpers are often lured to work for other families who increase their salaries, give them more time off and offer them mobiles.

"Most of the domestic helpers who abscond are Ethiopians, followed by Indonesians, Filipinos and Sri-Lankans," Khalid Al Azhari, a Riyadh-based recruitment agency employee, said. "Many of the helpers are abroad for the first time and face issues," he said.

Saudi crown Prince refuses to pardon royal

The prince in question had been sentenced to death for his alleged role in the death of a man

Gulf News (28.12.2013) - Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince has reportedly refused to pardon a prince, insisting there would be no intercession and that the law should take its course.

"The law applies to all without exceptions," Prince Salman Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saudi said.

"There is no difference between the statuses of the people. A powerful man facing the law is weak until justice is done and a weak man is powerful until..justice is done. No one has the right to intervene...

"This is our state and this is what we have pledged to do before God. Only justice should prevail," Prince Salman, also the kingdom's deputy prime minister and defence minister, wrote in a letter he addressed to the kingdom's interior minister that was published by social media networks and news site Sabq.

The prince in question, who was not named, had been sentenced to death for his alleged role in the death of a man.

He was then offered the opportunity by authorities to reconcile with the victim's family in the blood money tradition followed in Saudi Arabia.

Under the custom, he would be allowed to live if the victim's family accepted financial compensation.

However, and according to the letter from Prince Salman, the victim's father was not satisfied with the offer, claiming that it was not fair, and called for death sentence to be followed through.

Prince Salman insisted that the interior minister follow up with the matter and apply the law without bias.

Prince Salman was praised by social media users for his sense of justice that did not favour the powerful and rich over the weak and poor. Prince Salman was appointed defence minister in November 2011.

In June 2012, he was named crown prince and deputy prime minister following the death of his brother and former crown prince Nayef Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud.

Mass returns from Saudi risk instability in Yemen

IRIN (02.12.2013) - Around 200,000 Yemeni expatriate workers have returned from Saudi Arabia since June, according to estimates from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), amid a sharp escalation in deportations as Saudi authorities crack down on those breaking labour laws - developments that risk increasing poverty and destabilizing the transition in Yemen, say analysts.

The Yemeni government says it expects at least another 400,000 jobless returnees in coming months.

"[The returnees] complain of different kinds of violations, not necessarily from the authorities but from their sponsors (Kafeel) when they refuse to pay them any compensation for the work that they have done in their companies," said Hooria Mashhour, Yemen's Minister of Human Rights. "Other kinds of violations [take place] during the process of deportation, when they become subject [to] physical or psychological kinds of violations."

The returns have placed a huge burden on Yemen's fragile political transition, conjuring up memories of the 1990 expulsion of more than 800,000 Yemenis from Saudi Arabia, which contributed to the unravelling of a 1990 unification pact between the former North and South Yemeni states and led to the 1994 civil war.

"Without giving them the opportunities to live a decent life we fear that they might be turned into element of instability," said Mashhour. "For the short term indeed they are in bad need of immediate assistance like food and medical treatment, but for the long term we have to provide. [many] more job opportunities to cover their family's needs and [theirs] as well."

Working in neighbouring Saudi Arabia has been a way for Yemenis to escape their country's chronic unemployment; more than half of Yemenis aged 18 to 24 are unemployed.

"I went to Saudi two years ago to make a living for me and my family. The situation was good there, and there was no work here," said Radhwan, 25, who has just been deported at the end of the grace period, after two years in Saudi Arabia. "On the first day, Jeddah's biggest mall on Palestine Street was empty. Saudis don't work in the supermarkets, factories and shops. So what now?"

According to figures from IOM, which are helping to provide emergency assistance to returnees at the Al-Tuwal crossing point, 93 percent of returnees are male, with 98 percent saying they returned because they lacked proper documents.

"Yemenis who have been in Saudi Arabia since their grandfathers migrated are being kicked out with this new law. They have nothing in Yemen; they don't know anything about Yemen," said Radhwan.

Crackdown

In late March 2013, the police initiated a brief crackdown on foreign workers as part of a government policy to enforce labour laws and create more jobs for millions of unemployed Saudi workers.

Raids and checkpoints were suspended in April to give foreigners a chance to get their

papers in order, but the number of expatriates trying to obtain documents from their embassies overwhelmed capacity, and the government again extended the grace period to 4 November after which the crackdown began.

Under Saudi Arabia's work sponsorship scheme, the original employers of expatriate workers need to give permission for a change of employment, as well as permission to leave. Many sponsors also take the migrant workers' passports on arrival. Until now, the state has tolerated workers changing employers without the necessary paperwork because of the importance of foreign workers to the Saudi economy.

Thousands of families back home depend on Yemenis working abroad for life-sustaining remittance payments. According to surveys by IOM, three-quarters of those returning formerly sent back money to Yemen.

"The fact that the families will not receive these remittances anymore will have a major impact on them and the economy of their region," said IOM's Teresa Zakaria in a statement.

"We are looking, here, at approximately US\$5 million lost in remittances for the months of October and November alone. Most of them are returning to areas with high levels of food insecurity and malnutrition. The massive loss of income will inevitably exacerbate this situation," she said.

Abuse

Radhwan tried to smuggle himself back to Yemen to avoid being put in the deportees' database - an attempt to preserve his chances of legally returning later - but he was caught and arrested.

"Saudi forces caught me at the border fence near al-Tuwal. They took me to jail and put me in a small cell overcrowded with Yemenis. On arrival, a guard followed me into the bathroom and beat me with a wire cable," he said.

There are an estimated nine million migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, including large numbers of Bangladeshis, Yemenis and Ethiopians. Human rights groups have frequently reported cases of abuse and exploitation, but because of the difference in economic opportunities between one of the poorest countries on the Arabian Peninsula, and one of the richest, many Yemenis keep going north in search of work.

Around 35 percent of returnees interviewed by IOM reported having been physically abused and having had their possessions confiscated in Saudi Arabia.

Abdul Salam, 27, from Yemen's Rhayma province, has been smuggled into Saudi Arabia on four occasions and deported each time. "This time we were bussed back to [al-Tuwal,] Yemen. In the past they would fly us home."

In Saudi Arabia, he worked for Yemeni businessmen from his village, selling phones, perfumes and sweets. "They [Yemeni owners] only hire smuggled workers during holiday seasons, like Hajj, when law enforcement is more relaxed. During the rest of the year, the legitimate business owners would get kicked out of the country if [they] were caught employing undocumented workers like me."

When employed, Abdul Salam said he would send home about half of his monthly salary of 1,500 Saudi riyals (\$400) to his family in Yemen. "Even then, with his contribution, there wasn't enough money for the family," said his younger brother, Mohammed, who lives in Sana'a. "Now we have even less. We can't buy enough food for daily meals. We have no washing machine, no fridge. We can only afford the most basic things."

With the enforcement of labour laws, Abdul Salam said it has become tougher to find smugglers who could be trusted to lead home the droves of Yemenis who have sought to avoid being identified in the formal deportation process.

Abdul Salam had been fingerprinted three times in prior deportations, but even after being beaten and robbed last year by the gang he paid to get him back into Saudi Arabia, he said he decided to take his chances again on a smuggler for his most recent cross-border trip back to Yemen, in the hope of avoiding another stint in the Saudi prison system.

"I found a smuggler who took me half way, then disappeared," he said. "We started walking and found a farm, where we were given water and food. Before we finished eating, the police arrested us. They forced all 15 of us into a military jeep and drove back 400km to the jail, where we were crammed into a cell already completely full of people."

Vulnerable

Human Rights Watch (HRW) says Saudi Arabia has the right to seek compliance with its labour laws, but should look at how the current system leaves workers vulnerable to abuse.

"You have to understand why so many workers in Saudi have irregular status, why so many are working for companies and individuals [who] are not their official sponsors," Adam Coogle, Middle East researcher at HRW, told IRIN.

"Employers have such inordinate power [over] their employees. Where workers are subjected to problems such as non-payment of salaries, poor sanitation, sexual and physical abuse, there is little the workers can do because they need their initial employer's approval to change job. The worker system means they have to face abuse or work under the table illegally," he said.

Relations between Yemen and its richer northern neighbour have often been tense, exemplified by perennial disputes over the location and policing of their shared 1,458km border. Saudi Arabia supported the now-defunct regime of Yemen's ex-President Saleh in a civil conflict against Shi'ite Houthi rebels, a mutual enemy straddling the Yemeni-Saudi frontier.

With little chance of employment in Yemen, both Abdul Salam and Radhwan are planning to be smuggled over the border soon to look for work - but this time they intend to avoid Saudi Arabia and travel east into Oman.

Ethiopian migrant killed in Saudi crackdown

The man was trying to resist arrest, authorities say, as they pursue a crackdown on illegal workers, arresting 16,000.

Al Jazeera (11.06.2013) - An Ethiopian migrant has been killed by Saudi police after he tried to flee arrest during a round-up of thousands of foreigners suspected of working illegally in the kingdom.

A statement on Wednesday by Riyadh police chief Nasser el-Qahtani said security forces killed the African migrant worker in el-Manhoufa a day earlier when he and others tried to resist arrest.

The security sweep comes after seven months of warnings by Saudi Arabia's government, which has created a task force of 1,200 Labour Ministry officials who are combing shops, construction sites, restaurants and businesses in search of foreign workers employed without proper permits.

More than 16,000 people have already been rounded up, according to authorities.

Strict labour law

Police have also erected checkpoints to enforce the kingdom's strict labour rules that make it almost impossible to remain in the country without official sponsorship by an employer.

Residents said most shops have been closed since the sweep began on Monday, with many of the country's migrants avoiding the streets where they face possible arrest.

The state-backed Saudi Gazette reported on Wednesday that residents are already feeling the brunt of the everyday work the migrants provided, from ritual washings of corpses before burial to food delivery and bagging groceries.

Authorities say that since warnings were issued earlier this year, almost seven million foreigners in Saudi Arabia corrected their paperwork to accurately reflect their occupation and workplace.

The kingdom also issued more than one million final exit visas, which ban people from ever returning.

The Saudi-owned Asharq al-Awsat newspaper reported that authorities detained around 16,500 workers in the first 48 hours of the nationwide crackdown.

The newspaper quoted Saudi officials as saying that nearly half of the migrants were arrested near the southern border with Yemen.

Another 5,000 had been detained in Mecca, where some Muslims stay on illegally after pilgrimage.

Less than 1,000 were detained in the main city of Riyadh.

A resident in the poorer neighborhood of el-Manhoufa in Riyadh told the Associated Press news agency he saw police stopping people outside a mosque after prayers and arresting those who did not have the correct papers on them.

Pakistanis facing beheading in Saudi Arabia need immediate UN intervention

A written statement submitted by the Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC) to the Human Rights Council (Twenty-fourth session, Agenda Item 4, General Debate)

ALRC (06.09.2013) -

1. In view of the discussion on human rights, which is due to be held during the month of September 2013, the Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC) would like to direct the attention of the Human Rights Council (HRC) to denial of justice and fair trial being faced by several young Pakistanis detained in Saudi Arabia.

2. Some of young men presently await being beheaded.

3. The death sentence is by itself an unacceptable verdict. It is in clear violation of the right to life, one of the fundamental, internationally recognized, human rights. No person, being tried for any sort of crime, should face such extreme punishment. It is one that we, as human rights defenders, consider a relic from a less developed stage of human history.

4. In addition, beheading, in particular, is an exceptionally cruel form of administering the death penalty. It shows total disrespect for human dignity, inflicting upon the sentenced an unnecessary painful end to life.

5. The ALRC has documented cases of young Pakistani men, beset by financial difficulties in most cases, forced by local criminal organisations to act as 'mules' in trafficking drugs from Pakistan into Saudi Arabia. Many of these 'couriers' reported having been approached by locals known to them, who outlined for them a job opportunity abroad, offering help for getting a working visa in Saudi Arabia. However, once they arrive in Islamabad, having been asked to pick up their visas, the unfortunate young men are abducted and driven to isolated locations. They are held captive and forced, via a variety of threats and blackmail, to become drug-mules. In some cases, it is the direct threat of murder, in others, family members of the unfortunate carriers are kidnapped and held hostage until the 'job' is completed.

6. This is how Pakistani drug mules presently in Saudi Arabian prisons – with more on the way – have ended up ingesting a large amount of capsules.

7. For more details about specific cases documented, kindly refer to the Urgent Appeal Case[1] issued on 5 July 2013 and the Statement[2] issued on July 13, 2013 by the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), sister organisation to the ALRC.

8. Bewilderment arises regarding the poor monitoring and control of the airport authorities in Islamabad, and as to how the staff of the Pakistani Anti Narcotics Agency, despite their numbers and the quality detective equipment at their disposal, can fail so conspicuously at preventing such travelers, often in semi-conscious states, from boarding. There are well-founded reasons to believe that Pakistani drug peddlers and their fellow agents can rely on good 'connections' to easily board the unfortunate mules. They enjoy protection from corrupt officials in strategic positions at various levels of government. It is also known that some of the drug lords themselves regularly fly to Saudi Arabia in the shadow of *Umra* and *Hajj* – two of the Islamic obligations – to supervise their drug business, in the complete knowledge of the authorities in both countries.

9. The real criminals involved, of both nationalities, are well known and well-protected both in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. In Pakistan, they operate openly in the two provinces of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In Saudi Arabia, they have connections in Dammam city in particular. The Dammam airport is the preferred and by now renowned entry point for the racket. At the moment, several Pakistani 'mules' are incarcerated both in the Alqateef Awamia Dammam Jail and the Dammam Central Jail, sentenced to death by beheading. Every month at least one person is beheaded on the charges of *Fasad Fil Arz* (creating disorder on the earth of Allah). Many other Pakistani 'mules' are kept in Jeddah and Riaz jails.

10. Presently, it is estimated that about 300 Pakistanis are incarcerated on charges of drug trafficking in several prisons across Saudi Arabia. Most of them have been sentenced to long terms of imprisonment, ranging from 10 to 20 years, and have received no fair trial in the Saudi monarchy. They have been denied adequate legal help, which has affected the quality of legal remedy they obtained.

11. The real drug racketeers are never caught and put on trial. On the other hand, a large number of carriers have been arrested and punished with harsh sentences including beheading. A significant discrepancy, therefore, can be observed between the impunity enjoyed in both countries by the masterminds of the illicit business and corrupt officials and the inclemency faced in Saudi Arabia by the forcibly-recruited couriers.

12. Could the mismatch between the severity of the penalty (especially when capital punishment is awarded) and the crime supposedly committed by the couriers be related to the intent of physically erasing clues through which it may be possible to establish links between drug racketeers and Saudi authorities?

13. It is understood that the drug racketeers (of both nationalities), their entourages, the identities of the couriers working for them and even the details of the flights they catch in order to enter Saudi Arabia, are very well known to the Saudi authorities. And the Saudi authorities, in turn, do not seem particularly disturbed by the moral offence trafficking of drugs represents, in light of the strict interpretation of religious precepts applied in their country.

14. Furthermore, the majority of the Pakistanis convicted are men who have tried to detach themselves from such deceitful business and reported the trafficking to the airport authorities soon after landing in the hope of cooperating with the justice system, behaving honestly, and saving their own lives and those of their loved ones. Instead, it is these very men who have been instantly arrested and unfairly tried. The real drug traffickers have never been held accountable for being fully responsible for the illicit activities. There have been times when couriers have even pointed out the so-called 'receivers' waiting right outside the Dammam airport. But, they only met with the indifference and passivity of the Saudi police. The Islamic Courts, where the couriers have been tried, and which have been informed repeatedly about the identity of the drug peddlers living and operating in Saudi Arabia, have also taken no action.

15. The ALRC brings the reality behind this alarming predicament to the attention of the Human Rights Council in order to highlight the significant lack of protection the Government of Pakistan continues to provide its own people and the negligence and unresponsiveness shown in this serious matter. The Pakistan Embassy and its consulates in Saudi Arabia have refused to help their own citizens, while the national authorities also ignore them and have undertaken no action against the drug racketeers, despite the full-disclosure of their identity and location.

16. The failure of the Government of Pakistan to ensure its people legal protection abroad and to guarantee their right to life is a clear failure of the Pakistani state itself, one that cannot fulfill basic state obligations to protect its citizens, in this case victims of an unfair trial in Saudi Arabia.

17. The Pakistani airport authorities share responsibility for continually providing safe exit to young Pakistani men forced to carry drugs. The Anti Narcotics Department, and other governmental agencies of Pakistan (police included), which are supposed to monitor and investigate illicit networks, seem instead only too happy to allow the racketeers to operate undisturbed. In return, they receive some 'benefits', allegedly bribes, thanks to which the drug racketeers literally buy favour and abstinence from action. The absence of a proper investigative and prosecution mechanism is putting the

safety and livelihoods of innocent people at stake, people who are, in fact, uninvolved in the illicit activities in question, trapped in it only because of their poor background, and the threat to their own lives and the lives of their family members.

18. The ALRC would like to take this opportunity to emphasize that such contingencies should be seriously taken into account as mitigating circumstances in a more appropriate verdict for the poor couriers.

19. The ALRC urges the Government of Pakistan to show its commitment and take specific measures that have a concrete impact on the exposed problems concerning corruption of state agents, trafficking of drugs, and the imprisonment of its own people abroad, problems for which the Government of Pakistan is totally liable and fully responsible. The ALRC considers it unacceptable that, both in Pakistan and in Saudi Arabia, the competent authorities continue to fail to undertake any significant action, allowing the forcibly-recruited carriers to serve severe terms of imprisonment for crimes they have not orchestrated.

20. To our understanding, it is the arrests and imprisonments of the real racketeers, the masterminds, and the corrupt authorities, will show society that drug trafficking is monitored and punished by the state.

21. The ALRC calls on the Government of Pakistan, in particular its Ministry of Narcotics Control, not only to enhance its fight against drugs, but also to strengthen cross-border investigations along with domestic inspections in the name of transparency and legal order. The ALRC would like to highlight the fact that the securing of accountability is a matter of state responsibility, aimed at guaranteeing effective rule of law, protecting human rights, and ending impunity.

22. The ALRC finds it imperative that the above exposed matters are seriously taken into account and therefore urges the Human Rights Council to include in its discussions the issues of corruption and drug trafficking as well as the issues of the legal protection of forced couriers and their right to life. We strongly advocate release of the innocent carriers from their unjust imprisonment in a foreign land and the prompt withdrawal of the death sentences awarded to them.

About the ALRC: *The Asian Legal Resource Centre is an independent regional non-governmental organisation holding general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. It is the sister organisation of the Asian Human Rights Commission. The Hong Kong-based group seeks to strengthen and encourage positive action on legal and human rights issues at the local and national levels throughout Asia.*

Egypt's key player: Saudi Arabia

By Emily Dyer and Olivier Guitta

Henry Jackson Society (16.08.2013) - The international reaction to Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's violent crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood has been more or less the same, at least publicly.

Condemning the regime for the violence, while asking for a diplomatic solution, has been the U.S. and the EU's approach. But one country has remained silent so far and it is the key actor in the crisis: Saudi Arabia.

As long as Riyadh continues to bankroll the new regime throughout the interim period, General al-Sisi will not take American diplomatic efforts seriously, simply because he does not need to. The cancellation of military exercises by the US is just a symbolic gesture. Even withdrawing the yearly \$1.3 billion in aid from Washington may be met by a shrug from al-Sisi. In fact, Saudi Arabia has pledged to cover that shortfall, if the US decided to go ahead with this threat.

At this point, it is an understatement to say that President Obama has no leverage over al-Sisi. The proof is the fact that his administration - from Defense Secretary Hagel to Secretary of State Kerry - have made no headway whatsoever in their attempts to find a diplomatic exit to this crisis.

Despite recent reports of Saudi Arabia offering asylum to Mohamed Morsi, its support for the Egyptian military, even after the violent crackdown, is not going anywhere any time soon.

Saudi Arabia is thought to have been heavily involved in President Morsi's ouster, partly due to its rivalry with the Muslim Brotherhood's key financier, Qatar, for regional influence in the Gulf. Just days after Morsi was overthrown, Egypt's new leaders received a \$12 billion aid package from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait, and gas shortages that had been plaguing Morsi's Egypt for months suddenly stopped. Saudi Arabia, with whom General al-Sisi has longstanding connections having been the military attaché in Riyadh, offered its continued support throughout the interim period.

There is no love lost between Saudi Arabia and its Gulf partners, in particular the UAE, on one side and the Muslim Brotherhood on the other. And one can suspect that Saudi Arabia is quite keen on having the Egyptian army do the "dirty work" of eradicating the Muslim Brotherhood.

While the Muslim Brotherhood could have certainly profited from a major gain of sympathy from both the Egyptian street and the international community, the fact that they engaged in violence - attacking three Coptic churches - killed their credibility.

Also placing women and children at the front of the protests, as potential human shields, was not really a major public relations coup.

Being involved, one way or another, in terrorism in Northern Sinai - through Ansar al Jihad - is the cherry on the cake. In fact, since Morsi's ouster on July 3rd, terrorism in the Sinai has skyrocketed, including the killing of seven Egyptian soldiers on August 15.

As if to prove its involvement, Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Beltagy recently stated that terrorist attacks in Sinai will stop as soon as Morsi is reinstated as president.

The question remains now how far will the crackdown go and how much will the Muslim Brotherhood be able to retaliate. At this juncture, it looks that the Muslim Brotherhood has a lot of very well-armed and well-trained elements in its midst to inflict damage to the government forces.

General al-Sisi's cold shoulder towards the U.S. certainly matches the widespread anti-American feeling on the streets, largely due to Obama's support for the Muslim Brotherhood rather than the June 30th protesters. Al-Sisi therefore gains legitimacy among the Egyptian people every time he speaks out against Obama and, as long as Saudi Arabia continues to send support to Egypt, he will continue to use full force against those who threaten the army's interests. But the question remains whether Riyadh will sustain Washington's forthcoming pressure.

Emily Dyer is a Research Fellow at the Henry Jackson Society, where Olivier Guitta is the Director of Research.

Saudi rights activist Iman al-Qahtani given travel ban

A Saudi Arabian activist and journalist has been banned from travelling abroad

BBC (19.07.2013) - In a message on Twitter, Iman al-Qahtani said she had been stopped from flying to Istanbul. Only then, she said, was she told of her travel ban.

Ms Qahtani has been outspoken in her support for fellow human rights campaigners in the Arabian kingdom.

Saudi officials were said to have been unhappy with her reporting. In April, she said she would stop tweeting to protect her family from reprisals.

In a brief, dramatic tweet, she told her followers she was doing it for her mother's sake.

Live-tweeting trials

There were reports Ms Qahtani had been coming under pressure from the security services over her reporting of the trials of two leading Saudi human rights activists, Mohammad al-Qahtani and Abdullah al-Hamid.

The two men founded the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA). They were tried on a variety of charges including breaking their allegiance to the king and setting up an unlicensed organisation.

Iman Qahtani was among a group of activists and journalists who live-tweeted the hearings, posting pictures from inside the court. This allowed a rare transparency for the legal process in Saudi Arabia.

One of the judges originally ordered Ms Qahtani's arrest for providing false information, although this charge was later dropped.

Both the ACPRA founders were finally found guilty and given sentences of 10-11 years in jail.

Several other rights activists have been imprisoned in the past two years - indication the Saudi authorities are taking a harder line on dissent in the wake of the Arab Spring upheavals.

Iman Qahtani's silence on Twitter had raised concerns for her.

Now, she has broken that silence - if only to show she is clearly being closely observed by the security services.

A travel ban is a common penalty in Saudi Arabia for those who are believed to be stirring political unrest.

On Twitter, there have been messages of support from Saudi tweeters for Iman Qahtani, as well as fears expressed that the government's campaign to silence critical voices is intensifying.

Saudi man sentenced to paralysis? Ministry of Justice denies Ali Al-Khawahir's reported punishment

Huffington Post (09.04.2013) - The Saudi Ministry of Justice denied on Tuesday it had sentenced Ali al-Khawahir, a [Saudi man, to be surgically paralyzed](#) for his role in a crime committed a decade ago.

[Earlier reports in the Saudi media](#) indicated al-Khawahir, 24, faced the punishment as eye-for-an-eye justice. Al-Khawahir had stabbed a friend when he was 14, and the assault had left the victim paralyzed. As punishment, reports indicated, al-Khawahir could either pay the victim about \$267,000 or be paralyzed from the waist down.

In a series of tweets, however, the Saudi Ministry of Justice said the judge in the case had [dismissed demands for the paralysis sentence](#), the BBC reports.

Reuters notes that, despite denying the reports, [Saudi officials have not stated what the man's actual sentence](#) had been.

"The ministry would like to announce that this is utterly incorrect, and in fact the judicial ruling was contrary to that. The judge had [shied away from demanding this punishment](#)," read part of the statement, in a translation provided by Reuters.

Amnesty International [originally labeled the sentence "utterly shocking"](#) and likened it to torture. According to a release from the organization, Saudi Arabia also sentenced a person to be paralyzed in 2010, though it is unclear whether or not the punishment was actually carried out.

Amnesty 'outrage' at Saudi paralysis sentence

BBC News (02.04.2013) - The reported sentencing of paralysis for a Saudi man as punishment for paralyzing another man has been described as "outrageous" by a leading human rights group.

Saudi reports say the 24-year-old man could be paralysed from the waist down if he cannot pay his victim one million riyals (£250,000) in compensation.

Amnesty International says the sentence is a form of torture.

The man has been in prison for 10 years since he stabbed a friend in the back.

Saudi newspapers say Ali al-Khawahir was 14 when he paralysed his friend in the attack in the Eastern Province town of al-Ahsa.

The law of qisas, or retribution, in Saudi Arabia means his victim can demand that he suffers exactly the same punishment as he caused.

"Paralysing someone as punishment for a crime would be torture," [said Ann Harrison, Middle East and North Africa deputy director at Amnesty](#).

"It is time the authorities in Saudi Arabia start respecting their international legal obligations and remove these terrible punishments from the law."

This is the latest example of Saudi Arabia's fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law attracting international criticism.

Amnesty says the law has seen judicially approved eye-gougings and tooth extractions.

The rights group condemns the practice as tantamount to torture, urging that the latest punishment must not be enforced.

Amnesty's intervention will certainly fuel a growing debate in Saudi Arabia itself over its style of justice, says the BBC's Arab affairs editor, Sebastian Usher.

EU seeks change in Saudi policy on executions and other human rights violations

By Dr Mark Barwick, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (21.03.2013) - The European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights reiterated last week its outrage over the execution of seven Saudi men on 13th March. The men had been convicted of armed robbery and theft. Amnesty International referred to the executions as "an act of sheer brutality."

Saudi Arabia allows for the death penalty for a variety of offenses, including witchcraft and apostasy. The country has executed 23 people thus far in 2013, including these seven men.

The European External Action Service (EEAS), which implements EU foreign policy, reported to the parliamentary subcommittee that Catherine Ashton, High Representative for Foreign Affairs, pled vigorously with Saudi King Abdullah that the convicted men be granted clemency but to no avail.

EU conventions on human rights call for the universal abolition of the death penalty; however, in countries where abolition is rejected, the EU promotes a number of minimum standards for its application. In her communications to the Saudi government, Ms Ashton appealed to these standards, referring to the severity of the punishment for the crime, the fact that the executions were to be carried out in public and the age of the convicted men (some were below age 18 at the time of their arrest). The EEAS has also raised concern over evidence that the trial was not fair.

MEPs asked the EEAS what were the possibilities for advancing a dialogue over human rights with Saudi Arabia. Apart from these latest executions, for example, last month the government closed down the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association. In addition, two of its leaders have received prison terms of a minimum of 10 years for sedition and for "giving inaccurate information to foreign media."

The EEAS expressed the need to institutionalise the human rights dialogue with Saudi Arabia as a way forward. Thus far this has not been established for any of the Gulf States. The Saudi Minister of Justice will be visiting Brussels in April, during which these and other human rights concerns will be raised.

Breakthrough in Saudi Arabia: women allowed in parliament

Al Arabiya English (11.01.2013) - King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia issued Friday a historic decree allowing women to be members of the kingdom's previously all-male Shura Council for the first time. The decree amended two article in the council's statute introducing a 20 percent quota for women in the country's 150-member Shura Council, and the king appointed 30 women to join the consultative assembly.

The assembly, whose members are appointed by the king, works as the formal advisory body of Saudi Arabia. It can propose draft laws following which it would present them to the king, who, in turn, would either pass or reject them.

Saudi Arabia is known for its conservative culture where women are not allowed to drive despite the absence of a law saying so.

King Abdullah has introduced cautious economic and social reforms aimed at reconciling Saudi Arabia's religious traditions with the needs of a modern economy and youthful population.

The decrees were welcomed by female Saudi novelist Badriya al-Bishr in a statement to AFP as a "promise kept" by the king, who has been treading carefully over the years to empower women in his push for reforms.

Thuraya al-Arrayed, an education specialist, who was appointed by the king as a Shura Council member told Al Arabiya that the royal decree "gave confidence to women to take part in important decision-making matters in the country."

"It is an opportunity given to us, and I expect this experience to succeed. They are all qualified women," she said.

"We are not here to represent ourselves but to represent the public, women and men alike."

"I expect this decision to open doors for qualified women to take part in all fields and not just in politics but in all areas," al-Arrayed said.

Also among the Shura council female members is Thuraya Obaid, a veteran U.N. administrator who served notably as executive director of the U.N. Development Program and undersecretary general of the world body.

"They are the cream of the crop," Bishr told AFP.

"It is a good surprise and a promise that has been kept," by the king, she said.

"The king is determined to place women in the limelight," Bishr added, and voiced hope that her Saudi sisters "will secure more rights" in the future.

But the decrees stipulated strict guidelines for allowing women into the once all-male enclave, saying men and women will be segregated inside the council.

Women will be seated in a special area and enter the council through a separate door so as not to mix with their male colleagues.

Bellow is translation of the two amendments made to the Saudi Shura Council statute:

First amendment: Article 3

The Shura Council constitutes of 150 members, chosen by the king among scholars, experts and specialists, with women representation being no less than 20 percent of the number of members. The rights of members and their obligations and all their affairs are defined by a royal decree.

Second amendment - Article 22

First, each committee of the specialized committees constitutes a number of members defined by the council but should not be less than five. The council chooses these members and names the head of the committee and his deputy, taking into consideration the committees' needs, the specialization of the member and the women participation in the committees.

Second, the council can form among its members special committees to study a particular subject, and each committee has the right to form among its members one or more branch committees to study a particular subject.

Third, the woman enjoys in her membership at the Shura Council complete membership rights and abides by the obligations and responsibilities as well as assumes tasks.

Fourth, in confirmation of what was stated in the preamble of this decree of ours, the woman member commits to the principles of Islamic Shariah without any breach whatsoever and wears a proper hijab (veil), taking into account the following:

1: Reserving a place for the woman to sit, as well as her own gate for entry and exit in the main Council Chamber, and everything related to her affairs to ensure independence from men.

2: Reserving places for women, fully independent from places reserved for men, to include offices for them and for employees with required equipment and services, and space for prayer.

Fifth: This decree of ours is to be delivered to specialized parties for adoption and implementation.

List of women appointed to the Shura Council

1. Her Royal Highness Princess/ Sarrah bint Faisal bin Abdulaziz al-Saud
2. Dr./ Amal bint Salamah bin Sulaiman Al-Shaman
3. Dr. / Thuraya bint Ahmed bin Obeid bin Mohammed Obeid
4. Dr. / Thuraya bint Ibrahim bin Hussein al-Arrayed
5. Dr. / Al-Jawharah bint Ibrahim bin Mohammed Bu-Besht
6. Dr./ Hamdah bint Khalaf bin Miqbel Al-Enzy
7. Dr./ Hanan bint Abdulraheem bin Mutlaq Al-Ahmadi
8. Dr./ Hayat bint Sulaiman bin Hasan Sindi
9. Dr. / Dalal bint Mekhled bin Jahez Al-Harbi
10. Dr./ Zainet bint Muthanna bin Abduou Abu-Taleb

11. Dr. / Elham bint Mahjoub bin Ahmed Hasanain
12. Dr./ Salwa bint Abdullah bin Fahad Al-Hazaa
13. Dr. / Fatima bint Mohammed bin Mohsen Al Saeed Al-Qarni
14. Dr. / Fadwa bint Salamah bin Odeh Abu Marifah
15. Dr. / Fardous bint Saud bin Mohammed Al-Saleh
16. Dr. / Khawla Bint Sami Alkrie
17. Dr. / Lubna bint Abdulrahman bin Mohammed Al-Tayeb al-ansari
18. Dr. / Latifa bint Othman bin Ibrahim Al-Shaalan
19. Dr. / Mastourah bint Obaid bin Lafi Al-Husseini Al-Shammari
20. Dr. / Muna bint Abdullah bin Saeed Al Mushayt
21. Dr. / Muna bint Mohammed bin Saleh Al-Dosari
22. Her Royal Highness Princess / Moudi bint Khalid bin Abdulaziz al-Saud
23. Dr. / Moudi bint Mohammed bin Abdulaziz Al-Dugaither
24. Dr. / Nihad bint Mohammed Saeed bin Ahmed Al-Jeshi
25. Dr. / Nora bint Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman Al-Mubarak
26. Dr. / Nora bint Abdullah bin Ibrahim Al-Asqah
27. Dr. / Nora bint Abdullah bin Abdulrahman Al-Adwan
28. Mr. / Huda bint Abdulrahman bin Saleh Al-Halisi
29. Dr. / Hia bint Abdulaziz bin Nasser Al-Manea
30. Dr. / Wafa bint Mahmoud bin Abdullah Taibah

Rizana Nafeek awaiting beheading is forgotten by the government

Asian Human Rights Commission (11.07.2012) - Rizana Nafeek, arrested in 2005 and sentenced to death by beheading in 2007 is still languishing in the Dawadami Prison in Saudi Arabia as the government of Sri Lanka has failed to take the necessary diplomatic steps to obtain her release despite of their promises to do so.

As pointed out by the Asian Human Rights Commission the allegations against Rizana, who was 17 at the time of the alleged incident was baseless. She was charged with the murder of an infant under her care while by all circumstances it is clear that she had no involvement of any sort regarding this death and that in all probability the child died of natural causes. No foul play of any sort by her was alleged, even at the courts and there was no post mortem report giving the cause of death. Purely on the basis of a confession obtained under severe duress by police officers who spoke only in Arabic, a language she had no understanding of and without the benefit of a translator.

The sole basis for her conviction and the later affirmation of the conviction during appeal was that under Saudi Arabian laws a confession has finality and there is no room to challenge such confession during the trial.

There was an international outcry against the sentence and concern for her has been expressed by way of massive interventions on her behalf requesting her pardon from His Royal Highness, the King of Saudi Arabia.

His Excellency the President of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa also wrote a letter to His Royal Highness requesting a pardon. In Sri Lanka the government spokesmen have repeatedly claimed that missions have been sent and negotiations conducted with the family of the deceased child to obtain a pardon. However, in close examination of reports available in the media it becomes clear that the Sri Lankan government has failed to

established contact with the family and therefore there are no effective negotiations going on at all.

This means that the order for her execution could be carried out at any time.

Among those who have expressed concern for this case is the European Parliament where the EU High Representative and Vice President, Catherine Ashton has said that, "The EU will continue to follow it (Rizana's case) very attentively in close coordination with the authorities in her home country, Sri Lanka (May 10, 2012)."

The Asian Human Rights Commission is today issuing a dossier on all documents relating to the case of Rizana Nafeek and call upon everyone to make a renewed attempt to get her release by intervening with His Royal Highness the King of Saudi Arabia and also pressuring the Sri Lankan government to undertake effective diplomatic efforts to obtain her release.

Woman opens fire on religious police officers

By Amro Hassan

Associated Press (20.05.2010) / HRWF (12.03.2012) – www.hrwf.net - In an unprecedented outburst toward Saudi Arabia's religious police, a married woman shot at several officers in a patrol car after she was caught in an "illegal seclusion" with another man in the province of Ha'il on Tuesday.

"She shot at the officers to distract them and allow the man to escape instant detention," said Sheik Mutlak al Nabet, a spokesman for the religious police in Ha'il. He added that the unnamed woman's husband has filed an official report, asking for his wife to be punished and stripped of her Saudi nationality.

Saudi law forbids women to socialize with unrelated men or walk in public without a male guardian, other than her husband, father or brother. Members of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, known as the religious police, are tasked with segregating the sexes.

Saudi media report that the woman is Syria-born and recently obtained Saudi citizenship after living for years in the kingdom. Her male compatriot is still at large. The incident occurred only few days after the Saudi daily newspaper, Okaz, reported that a religious cop was taken to hospital with bruises after being punched by a woman in her 20s in the city of Al Mubarrazz.

The paper wrote that the young lady got violent with the officer after he asked her and man she was with at a public park to verify their relationship. Despite the possibility of facing imprisonment or lashing, the woman's fisticuffs was hailed by Saudi human rights activist Wajiha Huwaidar.

"People are so fed up with these religious police, and now they have to pay the price for the humiliation they put people through for years and years," she said. "This is just the beginning and there will be more resistance."

The religious police, who patrol shopping malls to make sure women are fully veiled, are reviled in much of the nation. King Abdullah has attempted in recent years to weaken their grip in an overall effort to soften the nation's fundamentalist Wahhabi Islam.
