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QATAR: Women reportedly subjected to forced gynecological exams in Qatar

Policies criminalize and punish pregnant women outside of wedlock.

By Rothna Begum

HRW (27.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3egMN1H> - On October 2, Qatari authorities removed 13 women from an Australia-bound Qatar Airways flight and subjected them to forced gynecological examinations after a premature baby was found abandoned in a toilet at Doha's Hamad International Airport according to an Australian news report this week.

Airport officials said the infant is "safe" and being cared for in Qatar. The media reported that airport officials said they took action after "medical professionals expressed concern" about the health of the mother and "requested she be located." But such actions would demonstrate the opposite of respect for women's health and dignity.

The media reports say these women were given no information and did not have an opportunity to provide informed consent. Forced gynecological examinations can amount to sexual assault. Media also reported that authorities removed and examined additional women from the airport and other flights.

The Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs said she is expecting a report from Qatari authorities sometime this week.

The reported invasion of these women's privacy is rightfully making headlines. But the circumstances that might have led a woman to leave the baby in the airport bathroom should be too.

In Qatar and across the Gulf region, sexual relations outside of wedlock are criminalized, meaning a pregnant woman who is not married, even if the pregnancy is the result of rape, may end up facing arrest and prosecution. Hospitals are required to report women pregnant outside of wedlock to the authorities. Abortion is also criminalized with limited exceptions including that women must have their husband's consent. Low-paid migrant women, like the more than 100,000 migrant domestic workers, in Qatar are disproportionately impacted by such policies.

The alleged actions of the Qatari authorities on October 2 would have failed many women – the unknown woman apparently forced to give birth in an airport toilet, unable to ask for assistance with her labor or on what to do with the baby, and the multiple women reportedly pulled off the plane for examinations.

Qatar should prohibit forced gynecological exams and investigate and bring to account any individuals who authorized any demeaning treatment. It should also decriminalize sex outside of wedlock. Authorities should ensure that pregnant people, regardless of their marital status, have access to quality sexual and reproductive health care and choices, including access to contraception, abortion, prenatal care, obstetric care, and adoption services without fearing arrest or prison.

SAUDI ARABIA begins trial of women's rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul

Closed trial in 'terrorism court' starts more than two years after her imprisonment for peaceful activism.

By Emma Graham-Harrison

The Guardian (10.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3oSfbLy> - Saudi Arabia has put a women's rights activist, Loujain al-Hathloul, on trial in a special court set up to handle terrorism cases, more than two years after she was detained over her peaceful activism.

She is accused, along with several other campaigners, of activities that "undermine the kingdom's security, stability and national unity," according to the state news agency. The trial began on International Human Rights Day, an irony noted by her family and campaigners.

"Guess what Saudi Arabia does on International Human Rights Day? It sends brave & peaceful activists like Loujain al-Hathloul to their first trial at the 'terrorism court', simply for wanting basic human rights," Amnesty International said on Twitter.

The group has described the specialised criminal court (SCC) where her case is being held as an "instrument of repression". Its judges have presided over unfair trials and handed down harsh rulings including multiple death sentences "in an effort to silence dissent", Amnesty said.

Wednesday's court hearing was not open to the public. It was not clear how long the trial would last or whether other female activists detained at the same time as Hathloul were also finally facing trial.

They were arrested in May 2018, shortly before the government dropped its longstanding ban on women driving. Hathloul in particular had been a prominent face of the grassroots

campaign for change, and also opposed the male guardianship system, which makes women second-class citizens.

She has been in jail ever since, awaiting trial. Relatives say she has been tortured, and this year she has been held incommunicado for long stretches of time and been on hunger strike more than once. A UN women's rights committee recently expressed alarm about her failing health.

UN human rights experts called for all charges to be dropped and for Hathloul to be released immediately.

"We are extremely alarmed to hear that Ms al-Hathloul, who has been in detention for more than two years on spurious charges, is now being tried by a specialised terrorism court for exercising her fundamental rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association," said Elizabeth Broderick, the chair of the UN working group on discrimination against women and girls.

At a brief hearing in an ordinary court last month, when the case was referred to the terrorism court, relatives said Hathloul looked unwell, shaking and speaking in a weak voice as she read out her four-page defence.

The looming transfer of power in the US to Joe Biden will increase pressure on Riyadh over its human rights record. Donald Trump the and Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, have been close allies, their bond helping blunt international scrutiny of Saudi's handling of dissent and its bloody intervention in Yemen.

Biden has promised to review US-Saudi relations, including Washington's support for the Saudi intervention in Yemen. Business ties will continue, however. US dependence on Saudi oil has fallen markedly as a result of domestic shale gas production, but the kingdom's political stability is still a key US concern.

SAUDI ARABIA: UK report calls out Saudi Arabia over women's rights abuses

UK legislator Baroness Helena Kennedy demands world leaders shun G20 meeting in Riyadh over jailed women activists.

Al Jazeera (12.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3f8jaQx> - A report released by a member of the United Kingdom's House of Lords has called on the world's leading economies to shun the G20 summit hosted by Saudi Arabia this year unless jailed women's rights activists are released.

"I want all of us to call upon those who will be participating in the G20 meeting to say we will only participate in this meeting being hosted by the crown prince of Saudi Arabia if you release these women," Baroness Helena Kennedy, a prominent Scottish barrister, said in a video statement released on Wednesday.

"These women are being detained because they are advocating for women's rights and it is seen as an affront to the power structures of Saudi Arabia," Kennedy added.

The United States, India and the UK are among countries that will attend this year's G20 summit starting on November 21, hosted by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, set to take place virtually amid the coronavirus pandemic.

One of the themes of the G20 summit is women's empowerment.

According to Kennedy's report, the charges laid out against the jailed women include "inviting and inciting people to change the political system in the kingdom; initiating a campaign on Twitter to request a new constitution and speaking to British journalists for a documentary about imprisonment in the kingdom".

"None of these would amount to crimes in any decent nation, and that is the problem," Kennedy said. "This is an unacceptable abuse of human beings."

Kennedy said among these women are academics, intellectuals, writers and journalists who were "leading voices" on women's issues.

One of them is Loujain al-Hathloul, 31, who was arrested along with about a dozen other female activists in May 2018, just weeks before Saudi Arabia lifted its ban on female drivers.

A UN women's rights committee called for her "immediate" release earlier this month, saying that al-Hathloul's deteriorating health was "deeply alarming".

In a recent interview, the Saudi ambassador to the UK was quoted as saying in an interview with The Guardian newspaper that the kingdom was considering clemency for the jailed women's rights activists.

However, Saudi Arabia's embassy in London later denied the report.

'Assault on fundamental freedoms'

On Monday, New York-based rights group Human Rights Watch also called on the G20 leading economies to press Saudi Arabia to release all those imprisoned unlawfully and provide accountability for past abuses.

The group said the G20 awarded Riyadh this year's presidency "despite the Saudi government's unrelenting assault on fundamental freedoms, including jailing and harassing public dissidents and human rights activists, unlawful attacks on civilians in Yemen, and flouting international calls for accountability for the murder by state agents of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi".

Since Saudi agents murdered Khashoggi at the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul in October 2018, there has been no accountability for senior officials involved in his murder.

Instead, Saudi Arabia has spent billions of dollars hosting entertainment, cultural and sporting events as a deliberate strategy known as "image laundering" to conceal its human rights abuses, HRW said.

SAUDI ARABIA: Internet activist Amani Al-Zain arrested after a large Twitter campaign

GCHR (27.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3dAHngS> - According to local reports received by the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), on 17 May 2020 the Presidency of State Security arbitrarily arrested Saudi Internet activist Amani Al-Zain, on direct orders issued by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. She remains in detention in an unknown location since her arrest in Jeddah.

The Presidency of State Security, a relatively new agency, was created by order of King Abdullah on 20 July 2017, as an umbrella agency for the counterterrorism and domestic intelligence services. The Presidency of State Security reports directly to the king himself.

An old recording of a video chat between Al-Zain and Egyptian Internet activist Wael Ghonim, has spread widely on social networks in which Al-Zain called the Saudi crown prince by the nickname "Abu Munshar" ("father of the saw"), referring to the order he issued to kill journalist Jamal Khashoggi, whose body was cut up with a saw at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 02 October 2020. During the above-mentioned video chat, which originally published on 15 October 2019, the two are seen joking about freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia.

Al-Zain uses her Twitter account, on which she last tweeted on 16 May 2020, to express her different opinions. She has been an opponent of the arrests and killings by the authorities of a large number of human rights defenders, including journalists and Internet activists.

Her arrest came after a large Twitter campaign bearing the Arabic hashtag #Amani_AlZain_insulting_Crown_Prince was initiated by an online army of government supporters who called for her arrest.

GCHR calls for the immediate release of Amani Al-Zain and for all those arrested in violation of their right to freedom of expression, including women's rights defenders. Over 20 women's rights defenders and their supporters remain in prison since a crackdown began in May 2018 prior to the lifting of the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia on 24 June 2018. Many of those arrested have also been subjected to vicious smear campaigns by pro-government trolls. Most human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia have been imprisoned for long sentences or forced into exile.

GCHR calls for the Saudi authorities to stop criminalising opinions and to respect their international obligations as a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC).

SAUDI ARABIA: Saudi women are speaking up online

Male guardianship, sexual harassment amongst major concerns.

By Hiba Zayadin

HRW (14.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2VvXnsp> - Over the past two weeks, Saudi women have taken to Twitter, using pseudonyms, to share their experiences with sexual harassment, the reasons behind their hesitance to report these abuses to the authorities, and demands for the abolition of the discriminatory male guardianship system.

It is a remarkable show of courage at a time when Saudi authorities – under the de facto rule of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman – have maintained a sweeping campaign of

repression that included dismantling and silencing the country's women's rights movement. Prominent women's rights activists like Loujain al-Hathloul and Samar Badawi languish in prison nearly two years since their arrests, while other women since released face travel bans and outstanding trials.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia introduced reforms for which these women had long advocated. Today, Saudi women can drive; those over 21 years old can obtain passports and travel without permission from male guardians; and recently introduced laws are meant to protect them against sexual harassment and employment discrimination.

But, as some of the anonymous Saudi women have revealed on Twitter, the road to equality is long.

Using two Arabic language hashtags which translate to "why I didn't report it" and "down with remnants of the guardianship system," Saudi women pointed to persistent elements of the male guardianship system that continue to keep women trapped in abusive situations.

Saudi women complained that if they attempt to flee abuse, they can still be arrested and forcibly returned if their male family members bring a legal claim based on uquq (parental disobedience), inqiyad (submission to a guardian's authority), or leaving the marital or guardian's home. They also spoke of how when they report abuse, they are often referred to closed shelters, which they are typically not allowed to leave unless they reconcile with family members or accept an arranged marriage.

The world is being told that Saudi Arabia is modernizing on women's rights. But the reality is that with no organized women's rights movement or environment in which women can safely and openly demand their rights, there is little room for further advances. The international community should call for the release of all women's rights activists, the safeguarding of women's right to freedom of expression and association, and for the complete abolition of the male guardianship system.

SAUDI ARABIA: Continuing arbitrary detention and judicial harassment of five women rights defenders

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a partnership of FIDH and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), has received new information and requests your urgent intervention in the following situation in Saudi Arabia.

FIDH (19.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2UujY8v> - The Observatory has been informed by reliable sources about the continuing arbitrary detention and judicial harassment of Ms. Loujain al-Hathloul, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah and Nouf Abdelaziz who have been detained for their peaceful defence of women's rights following a crackdown that started in May 2018.

According to the information received, on March 18, 2020, the hearings in the trial of Ms. Loujain al-Hathloul, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah and Nouf Abdelaziz was postponed to an unknown date following the closing of the courts due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

On March 10, 2020, the hearings in the trial of Mses. Loujain al-Hathloul and Mayaa al-Zahrani, which were scheduled for March 11, 2020, had already been postponed to March 18, 2020. No reason was then given to justify this postponement.

The Observatory recalls that 2018 saw an unprecedented crackdown against women rights defenders (see background information). Dozens were detained on vague security charges for defending women's rights. Several were reportedly tortured while in detention. The acts of torture included electric shocks, whipping the women on their thighs, rape threats and sexual harassment.

The Observatory strongly condemns the ongoing arbitrary detention of Mses. Loujain al-Hathloul, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah, and Nouf Abdelaziz, as well as the ongoing judicial harassment against them as well as against Mses. Aziza al-Youssef, Eman al-Nafjan, Hatoon al-Fassi, Amal al-Harbi, Abeer Namankani and Shadan al-Onezi, who were all temporarily released between March and May 2019, as such harassment seems only to aim at punishing them for their legitimate human rights activities.

The Observatory calls on the Saudi authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all women rights defenders currently detained in Saudi Arabia, and to put an end to the judicial harassment against them.

Background information [1]:

In September 2017, immediately after the announcement of a Royal Decree authorising women to obtain driving licences, the services of the Ministry of Interior contacted women's rights defenders to ask them not to comment on the new decree in the media. Mid 2018 repression took an unprecedented turning point with the arrest of dozens of women's rights defenders.

On May 15, 2018, Ms. Loujain Al-Hathloul, who had been involved in campaigns on the right of women to drive, was abducted in the United Arab Emirates, brought to Saudi Arabia against her will, and detained.

On the same day, Ms. Aziza al-Youssef, a key figure of women's fight for their political rights and a supporter of the campaign to abolish male guardianship, and Dr. Eman al-Nafjan, founder and author of the Saudiwoman's Weblog, who had also been involved in the driving campaign, were arrested and detained.

On June 6, 2018, Ms. Nouf Abdelaziz, a journalist, TV producer and women's rights defender, was arrested at her home.

On June 27, 2018, Ms. Hatoon al-Fassi, a prominent scholar and associate professor of women's history at King Saud University, was arrested. She was advocating for the right of women to participate in municipal elections and to drive, and was one of the first women to drive the day the ban was lifted on June 24, 2018. She was set to be interviewed by French media France 2 to talk about the lift of the driving ban shortly after.

Ms. Amal Al-Harbi, a woman human rights defender and the wife of prominent activist Mr. Fowzan Al-Harbi, co-founder of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), was arrested by State Security on July 30, 2018 while on the seaside with her children in Jeddah.

Ms. Shadan al-Onezi, Ms. Mayaa al-Zahrani, and Ms. Abeer Namankani were also detained later in May 2018.

On July 30, 2018, security forces arrested Ms. Samar Badawi and Ms. Nassima Al-Sadah.

On March 13, 2019, Riyadh Criminal Court summoned Meses. Loujain al-Hathloul, Aziza al-Youssef, Eman al-Nafjan, Amal al-Harbi, Hatoon al-Fassi, Shadan al-Onezi, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Nouf Abdelaziz, Abeer Namankani along with a 10th woman human rights defender.

Actions requested:

Please write to the authorities in Saudi Arabia, urging them to:

- i. Guarantee in all circumstances the physical integrity and psychological well-being of the above-mentioned women human rights defenders, as well as of all detained human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia;
- ii. Ensure Meses. Loujain al-Hathloul, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Nouf Abdelaziz, Samar Badawi, Nassima Al-Sadah and the other prosecuted women human rights defenders have unhindered access to their families and lawyers and respect in all circumstances their right to a fair trial;
- iii. Immediately and unconditionally release Meses. Loujain al-Hathloul, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Nouf Abdelaziz, Samar Badawi and Nassima Al-Sadah as well as all human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia and drop all the charges against them, as their detention is arbitrary since it only aims at punishing them for their legitimate human rights activities;
- iv. End all forms of harassment, including at the judicial level, against Meses. Aziza al-Youssef, Eman al-Nafjan, Amal al-Harbi, Hatoon al-Fassi, Abeer Namankani, Shadan al-Onezi, Samar Badawi and Nassima Al-Sadah and the other women human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia,
- v. Comply in all circumstances with all the provisions of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, in particular its Articles 1, 6(c) and 12.2;
- vi. More generally, ensure in all circumstances the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with international human rights standards and instruments ratified by Saudi Arabia.

Addresses:

- His Majesty, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, King of Saudi Arabia and Custodian of the two Holy Mosques, Fax: (via Ministry of the Interior) +966 11 403 3125; Email: info@moi.gov.sa; Twitter: @KingSalman
- His Excellency, Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Fax: (via Ministry of the Interior) +966 11 403 3125; Email: info@moi.gov.sa
- H.E. Waleed bin Mohammad Al Samaani, Minister of Justice, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Fax: + 966 11 405 7777; Email: info@moj.gov.sa
- His Royal Highness Prince Abdulaziz Bin Saud Bin Naif Bin Abdulaziz, Minister of Interior, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Fax: + 966 11 401 1111 / + 966 11 401 1944 / + 966 11 403 1125; Email: info@moi.gov.sa
- H.E. Adel bin Ahmed El Jubeir, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fax: + 966 11 403 0645 ; Email: info@mofa.gov.sa
- H.E. Abdulaziz Alwasil, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United Nations Office in Geneva, Switzerland. Fax: +41 22 758 00 00. Email: saudiamission@bluewin.ch

• H.E. Abdulrahman bin Soliman Al-Ahmed, Ambassador, Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Brussels, Belgium. Fax: +32 2 6468538. Email: beemb@mofa.gov.sa

Please also write to the diplomatic missions or embassies of Saudi Arabia in your respective country as well as to the EU diplomatic missions or embassies in Saudi Arabia.

Kindly inform us of any action undertaken quoting the code of this appeal in your reply.

[1] See Observatory Urgent Appeals SAU 003 / 0518 / OBS 073, SAU 004 / 0718 / OBS 093 and SAU 005 / 0818 / OBS 103, published on May 24, 2018, on July 6, 2018 and on August 14, 2018.

SAUDI ARABIA: Saudi military opens first women's section

The initiative is the first to allow women to climb the ladder towards senior ranks.

By Aseel Bashraheel

Arab News (20.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2vbqJ67> - Saudi military chief of staff, Gen. Fayyad Al-Ruwaili, launched the first military section for women in the Saudi Arabian Armed Forces on Sunday.

The director general of admission and enlistment, Maj. Gen. Imad Al-Aidan, explained the regulations of acceptance, and allocated locations where the female staff will be stationed.

Under the initiative to incorporate more women into the field, previously announced in October 2019, women can now join the military as lance corporals, corporals, sergeants, and staff sergeants in the Royal Saudi Land Forces, Air Force, Saudi Arabian Navy, Air Defense Forces, Strategic Missile Forces and Armed Forces Medical Services.

The initiative is the first to allow women to climb the ladder towards senior ranks.

Former Shoura Council member Haya Al-Muni'I previously told Asharq Al-Awsat that these new laws support women's rights and capabilities in the Kingdom's military.

"Naturally, they will enter a new sphere of work. It's a reflection of a national belief in the equality between women and men," she said.

The initiative is part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 Program, pushing for the empowerment of women and giving them more leadership positions, and highlighting the significance of their involvement across different fields.

SAUDI ARABIA: Repressive site for Dakar Rally

As Amaury Sport Race proceeds, women activists sit in prison.

HRW (03.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2uzRlxx> - The Amaury Sport Organisation should use its decision to move the Dakar Rally to Saudi Arabia to denounce the persecution of

women's rights advocates in the country, Human Rights Watch, MENA Rights Group, and 11 other international human rights organizations said today. The 2020 Dakar Rally – formerly known as the Paris-Dakar Rally – will begin on January 5, 2020, in Jeddah, and finish on January 17, 2020, 9,000 kilometers later, in Al-Qiddiya.

"The Amaury Sport Organisation and race drivers at the Dakar Rally should speak out about the Saudi government's mistreatment of women's rights activists for advocating for the right to drive," said Minky Worden, global initiatives director at Human Rights Watch. "Fans, media, and race teams shouldn't be blinded by the rally's spectacle while Saudi Arabia 'sports-washes' the kingdom's jailing of peaceful critics."

The Dakar Rally is an annual off-road endurance race organized by the French Amaury Sport Organisation. In April, the company announced that the 2020 rally would be held throughout Saudi Arabia as part of a five-year partnership with its government.

Sponsors, broadcasters, and athletes are affected by sports organizations' choices to hold major events in countries that violate basic human rights, the groups said. By agreeing to a five-year relationship with Saudi Arabia, the Amaury Sport Organisation should also agree to adopt and carry out a human rights policy that would identify risks and make use of its leverage to promote respect for human rights in Saudi Arabia and across its operations. FIFA, the global football organization, and other major companies have adopted such policies in accordance with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Since the murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018, Saudi Arabia has faced increased international criticism over its human rights record – particularly its lack of transparency regarding the investigation of Khashoggi's murder and its leading role in a military coalition responsible for serious violations of the laws of war in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia has also created one of the most hostile environments for human rights defenders in recent years, arbitrarily detaining dozens of rights advocates. They include Loujain al-Hathloul, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Sadah, and Nouf Abdulaziz, who advocated women's right to drive and an end to the discriminatory male guardianship system. While some others have been temporarily released, they and the four who remain in detention are still on trial for their peaceful activism. Several activists have alleged that they were tortured in detention, including with electric shocks, flogging, sexual threats, and other ill-treatment.

"More than a dozen women drivers will take part in the Dakar Rally while Saudi women activists languish in jail for promoting the right to drive," said Inès Osman, director of MENA Rights Group. "Saudi Arabia should not get a free lane because it is hosting a prominent sporting event like the Dakar Rally."

Human Rights Watch, MENA Rights Group, and various other groups urge Dakar organizers, participants, and official broadcasters to press Saudi authorities to immediately release all detained Saudi women's rights defenders and drop the charges against them. The Amaury Sport Organisation should engage with human rights advocates and adopt a human rights policy to ensure that its operations do not contribute to human rights violations.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises outline companies' duties to prevent or mitigate adverse human rights impacts resulting from business operations. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights provide that business enterprises have a responsibility to "avoid causing or contributing to adverse human rights impacts through their own activities," "address such impacts when they occur," and "seek to prevent them."

“The Amaury Sport Organisation has an opportunity to join other sporting bodies in advancing respect for human rights where they hold events,” said Bénédicte Jeannerod, France director at Human Rights Watch. “Adopting and abiding by a human rights policy will mean avoiding having to endorse a repressive host country’s abusive record.”
