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Grave human rights violations addressed with denials and more promises

Human Rights Council adopts Universal Periodic Review outcome on Saudi Arabia

Amnesty International welcomes Saudi Arabia's engagement with the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and its acceptance of a number of recommendations, including to dismantle or abolish the system of male guardianship and to allow women to freely travel, work, study, marry and access health care and other public services.¹

The organization is concerned, however, at the authorities' persistent denial of grave human rights violations and longstanding systemic discrimination, particularly against women and minorities, and their unwillingness to effectively address these violations. This unwillingness is also reflected in the authorities' rejection of recommendations to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,² the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,³ the Optional Protocols to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment⁴ and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women,⁵ the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,⁶ and their ongoing refusal to allow UN human rights mechanisms and international non-governmental organizations, including Amnesty International, access to the country to document human rights violations.

There are no independent human rights organizations in Saudi Arabia and the authorities have rejected recommendations to enact and implement a law on associations to enable NGOs to operate legally, without harassment and undue government interference.⁷ Amnesty International is concerned that not only have the authorities refused to recognize independent human rights organizations, in 2013 they sentenced most of the founders of these unlicensed human rights organizations to lengthy prison terms after grossly unfair trials.

Amnesty International is greatly concerned that the authorities claim that freedom of expression is guaranteed in Saudi law,⁸ while witnessing increased repression of all forms of dissent. In recent months, scores of people have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms for posting a message on Facebook or for retweeting someone else's post. The authorities continue to ban peaceful public gatherings and to punish those who support those peacefully expressing their opinion in public.

¹ A/HRC/25/3, paragraphs 138.102 (Australia) and 138.108 (Sweden).

² Ibid., paragraph 138.4 (Sweden).

³ Ibid., paragraphs 138.5 (Tunisia) and 138.8 (Albania).

⁴ Ibid., paragraphs 138.6 (Tunisia) and 138.8 (Albania).

⁵ Ibid., paragraphs 138.8 (Albania) and 138.26 (Spain).

⁶ Ibid., paragraphs 138.21 (Slovakia) and 138.22 (Uruguay).

⁷ Ibid., for refused recommendations see paragraphs 138.50 (Ireland) and 138.53 (Czech Republic), for recommendations that have not been responded to see paragraphs 138.48 (State of Palestine), 138.49 (Germany), 138.51 (Lithuania), and 138.53 (Czech Republic), and for recommendations partially accepted without specification see paragraphs 138.46 (Netherlands), 138.47 (United States of America), 138.52 (France), and 138.54 (Canada).

⁸ A/HRC/25/3/Add.1, p. 5.

A new anti-terrorism law, which came into effect in February, defines terrorist crimes in vague terms as acts that directly or indirectly aim at “disturbing the public order of the state”, “destabilizing the security of society, or the stability of the state”, “endangering its national unity”, “revoking the basic law of governance or any of its articles”, or “harming the reputation of the state or its standing”. These vague charges are used to silence and imprison human rights activists.

The authorities claim that freedom of belief and religion is guaranteed in law,⁹ yet deny the existence of religious minorities in the Kingdom and have rejected recommendations on the rights of religious minorities to build and maintain places of worship and to publicly practice their faith.¹⁰ Minorities, such as the Saudi Arabian Shi’a and Ahmadi Muslim communities, continue to face severe discrimination, as do migrant workers of Christian faith.

The authorities also deny the existence of systemic discrimination against women.¹¹ Within days of the UPR Working Group session in October 2013, the authorities publicly stated that they would punish all women who dare to drive a car or participate in the *Women to Drive* campaign.

The authorities claim that the death penalty is applied only to the most serious crimes and that juveniles are not sentenced to death.¹² Yet, in 2013, at least three juveniles were executed after grossly unfair trials, and the death penalty continues to be applied to a wide range of non-lethal crimes, including adultery, armed robbery, apostasy, drug smuggling, kidnapping, rape, “witchcraft” and “sorcery”. Some of these “offences”, for example apostasy, should not even be criminalized according to international standards.

Amnesty International also regrets that Saudi Arabia has not provided answers to six recommendations¹³ or provided explanations in the report, as it indicated it would, which parts of the 36 partially accepted recommendations it rejects.¹⁴

Background

The UN Human Rights Council adopted the outcome of the UPR of Saudi Arabia on 19 March 2014 during its 25th session. Prior to the adoption of the review outcome, Amnesty International delivered the oral statement above.

Amnesty International had earlier submitted information on the situation of human rights in Saudi Arabia: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE23/018/2013/en/38b468c8-480f-4469-b5ae-18845b725cfc/mde230182013en.pdf>

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⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ A/HRC/25/3, paragraphs 138.169 (Italy) and 138.193 (Austria).

¹¹ A/HRC/25/3/Add.1, p.5.

¹² Ibid., pp. 6-7.

¹³ A/HRC/25/3, paragraphs 138.48 (Palestine), 138.49 (Germany), 138.51 (Lithuania), 138.53 (Czech Republic), 138.59 (Uruguay), and 138.117 (Argentina).

¹⁴ Ibid., paragraphs 138.7 (Czech Republic), 138.9 (Latvia), 138.10 (Republic of Korea), 138.19 (Paraguay), 138.20 (Philippines), 138.23 (Uruguay), 138.32 (Brazil), 138.34 (Canada), 138.35 (Canada), 138.37 (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland), 138.39 (Austria), 138.41 (Hungary), 138.42 (Chile), 138.43 (Costa Rica), 138.45 (Canada), 138.46 (Netherlands), 138.47 (United States of America), 138.52 (France), 138.54 (Canada), 138.84 (Bosnia and Herzegovina), 138.85 (Czech Republic), 138.88 (Latvia), 138.109 (Senegal), 138.110 (Uruguay), 138.111 (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland), 138.124 (Lithuania), 138.125 (France), 138.126 (Austria), 138.130 (Norway), 138.137 (Switzerland), 138.144 (Netherlands), 138.148 (Nigeria), 138.164 (Norway), 138.175 (Norway), 138.196 (Moldova), and 138.223 (Netherlands).