

Theme leaflets (5)

AI Index: MDE 23/10/00

Saudi Arabia

Culture of brutality

Torture

“I told my investigators... ‘What crime do you have against me?’... Their answer was nothing else but beating me... They tied my hands behind my back, then they shackled my legs, then tied my hands to my feet. After, they pulled me flat on the ground and then they started beating me. This was their answer.”

A political prisoner held in Saudi Arabia in 1996 spoke these words. He and many other former prisoners have revealed a culture of police brutality, torture and ill-treatment in many police stations, prisons and detention centres across the country. Beatings with sticks, electric shocks, cigarette burns and nail-pulling are some of the torture methods often described.

Saudi Arabia’s criminal justice system facilitates torture. Lack of judicial supervision of arrest and detention, denial of prompt access to relatives and a doctor, and no access to lawyers all leave prisoners extremely vulnerable to abuse. Torture is used to extract confessions and to enforce discipline. Sometimes it is inflicted apparently without reason.

The judicial punishment of flogging, which amounts to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, is regularly imposed. Offences related to alcohol, breaking strict moral codes and theft are punished by anything from 50 to several thousand lashes, carried out in prison or in public squares with a bamboo stick.

There appears to be no upper limit on the number of lashes judges can impose. The most lashes in a single case recorded by Amnesty International is 4,000, imposed on Muhammad ‘Ali al-Sayyid, an Egyptian convicted of robbery in 1990. The sentence was reportedly carried out at a rate of 50 lashes every two weeks. After each session he was left with bruised and bleeding buttocks, unable to sleep or sit for three or four days afterwards.

A hand cut off or a foot and hand cut off — such irrevocable punishments that amount to torture are imposed in Saudi Arabia for theft and burglary after grossly unfair trials. Amnesty International knows of 90 cases of judicial amputations between 1981 and December 1999, but the true total may be far higher.

In acceding to the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in 1997, Saudi Arabia voluntarily committed itself to prevent torture and is obliged not to impose any punishments that amount to torture or gross ill-treatment.

Write to the Saudi Arabian authorities and ask them to:

- Take effective steps to eradicate torture from police stations, detention centres and prisons.
- Carry out prompt investigations into allegations of torture.
- Ensure that perpetrators of torture are brought to justice.
- Take steps to stop the use of the judicial punishments of flogging and amputation.
- Initiate human rights training programs at all levels for all authorities involved in arrest, detention and interrogation.

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Every day people in Saudi Arabia suffer violations of their basic human rights. Their suffering is perpetuated and hidden by a system based on secrecy and fear, and is largely ignored by the world's governments.

Anyone who dares voice dissent is likely to be imprisoned. Women face systemic discrimination. Anyone not in a position of influence is at risk of arbitrary arrest and detention, particularly members of religious minorities and those deemed to have broken the country's strict moral codes.

People are arrested with little or no explanation. They are denied access to a lawyer. They are tortured and ill-treated. They are convicted after secret and summary trials, sometimes solely on the basis of confessions extracted under duress. They face punishments including execution, amputation and flogging and in all cases have no meaningful right of appeal.

The Saudi Arabian government refuses to allow outside scrutiny of its human rights record and has ignored Amnesty International's many requests for information, constructive dialogue or implementation of reforms that would protect human rights.

Amnesty International is stepping up the pressure. It is issuing a series of documents to highlight the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia and to demand action from the authorities and the international community to put an end to the secrecy and suffering in Saudi Arabia.

Please join us! Your help is needed.

Captions

Front photo: A man being flogged in the main square in Riyadh © Camera Press

'Imad Hashim was flogged on his bare back as a judicial punishment. The marks left by the lashes show the extent of physical damage that flogging can cause. © Private

"I thought it will be fast but no, it was done one at a time... [The policeman] really takes his time before striking. I started counting and when it reached 40 I thought I could not make it... I prayed so hard... At last it reached 60... I could not explain the pain I experienced."

Nieves, a Filipina who received 60 lashes for a "moral" offence she denied she had committed.

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