

Ethiopian Christians arrested at prayer facing deportation from Saudi Arabia

Country/Region: Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Middle East and North Africa

A group of 35 Ethiopian Christians are facing deportation from Saudi Arabia for “illicit mingling” after they were arrested in a police raid on a private prayer meeting in one of their homes.

The 29 women and six men had gathered to pray at a house in Jeddah on 15 December when police burst in and detained them. The women were taken to Buraiman prison, where they were strip-searched and sexually abused. The men were held at a police station in Jeddah for two days before also being transferred to Buraiman prison. Officers kicked and beat the men and called them “unbelievers”.

Three members of the group reported their ordeal to Human Rights Watch via telephone from prison.

They complained of inadequate medical care and unsanitary conditions at the prison. One of the women is diabetic; she was given one injection in the prison clinic that caused swelling, and she has not been given further medical attention since.

Around ten days after their arrest, some of the Christians were taken to court, where they were made to put their fingerprints to a document without being allowed to read it.

They were told that they were being charged with “illicit mingling” of unmarried persons of the opposite sex, despite Saudi Arabia not having any law that defines this offence. The entire group now faces deportation.

Rights “trampled”

The Saudi government enforces an extreme and puritanical version of Islam, banning the public practice of all un-Islamic religions. In 2006, the government said that it would stop interfering with private worship by non-Muslims, but in reality the *mutawaaah* (religious police) sometimes disrupt and raid private Christian meetings.

More than a million expatriate Christians are thought to be living in Saudi Arabia. There are very few indigenous Christians; all the country’s citizens must be Muslim and conversion to Christianity is punishable by death.

Human Rights Watch said that the Saudi Arabian authorities were “trampling on the rights of believers of other faiths” even while King Abdullah was setting up an international interfaith dialogue centre. The group added: “The Saudi government needs to change its own intolerant ways before it can promote religious dialogue abroad.”

Call to challenge persecution

Barnabas Fund has launched a new campaign, *Proclaim Freedom*, for 2012 calling on Western governments to put pressure on states such as Saudi Arabia that persecute or condone the persecution of Christians within their borders.

In a written “Confirmation of Policies” document the Saudi government sent to the US government, the former said it would “guarantee and protect the right to private worship for all, including non-Muslims who gather in homes for religious practice” and “ensure that members of the [religious police] do not detain or conduct investigations of suspects, implement punishment, [or] violate the sanctity of private homes”. The government also said it would investigate any infringements of these policies.

Will the United States and other Western governments now hold the Saudi government to account for the apparent violation of this commitment in the case of these Ethiopian Christians?



The Christians were arrested at a house in Jeddah
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