

Four Sri Lankan workers beheaded in Saudi Arabia

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Last Monday the Saudi Arabian government beheaded four Sri Lankan migrant workers—Sanath Pushpakumara, E.J.Victor Corea, Ranjith De Silva and Sangeeth Kumara—despite years of protest from international human rights organisations and the victims’ pleas for clemency. The beheading brought the number of people executed in Saudi Arabia this year to at least 17, compared to 38 for all of 2006. Two-thirds of those killed were foreign nationals.

An estimated 350,000 Sri Lankans are working in Saudi Arabia and make up a significant portion of the 8.8 million foreigners living and working in the country. According to the report, *Bad Dreams—Exploitation and abuse of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia*, published by Human Rights Watch in July 2004, foreign nationals account for 67 percent of the workforce and hold 90 to 95 percent of private-sector jobs. Most come from South Asia and Africa to escape rising unemployment and poverty.

The overwhelming majority are poorly paid and heavily indebted, due to the exorbitant fees charged by recruiting agencies. They often work as cleaners in hospitals and schools, as plumbers, carpenters, labourers and garbage collectors. Women are often engaged as domestic servants, assistants in beauty salons and as seamstresses. The report stated that migrant workers were often paid far lower salaries than promised and subjected to long working hours—up to 12 hours or more daily without overtime. Many instances were cited of salaries being unpaid for months and medical care being denied, although complaints are rarely made for fear of summary dismissal.

In these circumstances, the use of the medieval Islamic law, including the death penalty and other brutal forms of punishment, serves a very definite political purpose. Whatever its religious justification,

this legal system is being exploited by the autocratic Saudi regime to intimidate and terrorise the flood of cheap immigrant labour, on whom the country’s small wealthy elite is increasingly dependent.

The four Sri Lankan workers were publicly executed for allegedly “forming a criminal gang which robbed a number of companies and threatened accountants and workers with weapons, shooting one of them and stealing his car”. They were arrested in March 2004 and convicted by an Islamic religious court in October of the same year.

After these sentences were upheld in March 2005, the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) issued a statement, urging the Sri Lankan government to intervene to save the lives of Pushpakumara, Corea and De Silva. The fourth prisoner, Sangeeth Kumara, was not mentioned because he was not sentenced to death by the court, but was serving a 15-year prison sentence. The AHRC said the prisoners had received penalties far more severe than international legal standards, and those of their home country.

From inside Al Nayad Prison in Riyadh the victims continually objected to the convictions because they were denied any legal representation. No substantial witnesses were presented in court to support the charges against them. They repeatedly appealed to the Sri Lankan authorities to secure their return to serve an appropriate sentence after facing a fair trial in Sri Lanka.

In an attempt to deflect adverse international attention, the Sri Lankan Embassy in Saudi Arabia promised in March 2005 to appeal on behalf of the prisoners. The embassy confirmed that a discussion had been held with the Sri Lankan Foreign Employment Bureau (FEB), which organises the recruitment of overseas workers, to finance legal proceedings to seek

reduced sentences.

When family members in Sri Lanka subsequently gave interviews to the media about the plight of their relatives in prison, President Chandrika Kumaratunga issued a press release, claiming to have written to Saudi authorities requesting clemency. The Sri Lankan Embassy in Saudi Arabia, however, could give the AHRC no details of this communication.

Family members made numerous private visits to the current Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse, even before his election in November 2005, requesting urgent help. A demonstration of several hundred people was held in Colombo following which Rajapakse, then the prime minister, met a delegation and personally guaranteed to intervene. A photograph of Rajapakse meeting the families appeared in the local press.

De Silva's mother has subsequently made a personal appeal to Rajapakse to help save her only son, while Pushpakumara made requests to see his child who was born after he left for Saudi Arabia.

Faced with continued disinterest and lying pretences from the Sri Lankan government, De Silva announced—just two weeks before his execution—that he had started to write a book about his plight. He said he would seek help to publish the book in order to issue a wider call for justice.

Following the executions, the AHRC issued a statement on its website, saying, “the [Sri Lankan] government must explain the execution of three whose death sentences were said to have been reconsidered and the execution of another who was sentenced only to imprisonment in Saudi Arabia”.

According to the AHRC, the Sri Lankan government had earlier confirmed, “that the matter was being actively considered by the Saudi Arabian authorities and that the sentences would be commuted to life imprisonment”. Hence, the execution had come as a shock, with some family members only informed by a local news agency.

Government spokesmen Keheliya Rambukwella told the BBC Sinhala Service that the government was in the process of recovering the bodies and “advises Sri Lankans going abroad to comply with the laws of the land”. He made no mention the government's previous comments that the trial might have fallen short of international standards, with no legal representation allowed.

This duplicity again reveals that the Sri Lankan government is not the least interested in the plight of Sri Lankan workers overseas, even when their maltreatment involves breaches of fundamental human rights and international law. As the AHRC stated, it is a basic obligation of any government to provide legal assistance for its citizens if convicted abroad, especially when facing death sentences.

The AHRC called on the Sri Lankan government for an explanation. “Beyond the concerns of the four individuals, this execution raises questions regarding the relationship Sri Lanka has with other nations, particularly ones in which local citizens engage in large-scale employment. Do such relationships imply some form of supply of slave labour where the rights of the citizens are abandoned in pursuit of trade relations and foreign exchange earnings? Is Sri Lanka not in a position to take up the issues of the rights of citizens in a strong manner for fear of losing trade agreements or other contracts?”

The answers to these questions are obvious. The Sri Lankan government will do nothing to threaten the virtual slave labour arrangements by which one million Sri Lankan workers—one eighth of the country's labour force—work overseas to support their families. The government benefited directly from the \$US2.3 billion in remittances sent home by Sri Lankan workers abroad last year, with well over 50 percent coming from workers in the Gulf.

Rajapakse's complacent and callous response to the execution of four overseas workers is simply the latest example, following its refusal to urgently rescue the 90,000 Sri Lankans stranded in heavily bombed Lebanon last year.



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