

Young Sri Lankan maid faces execution in Saudi Arabia

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Rizana Nafeek, a 19-year-old Sri Lankan female worker, was sentenced to death by a three-member panel of judges in Dawadami High Court in Saudi Arabia on June 16. Nafeek's case is another instance of the barbaric conditions facing hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers in the Middle East, and the Sri Lankan government's callous disregard toward them.

Nafeek was convicted of killing a four-month-old infant who was put in her care. She arrived in Riyadh in May 2005 to work as a housemaid and was sent by her employer, Naif Jiziyan Khalaf Al Otaibi, to his family household in Dawadami. Shortly after that, she was assigned to look after the family's baby although she had no experience or training in child care.

On May 22, 2005 she was left alone to bottle-feed the baby. Around 12.30 p.m. the boy started choking. Nafeek panicked, tried to sooth the child by patting his chest, neck and face, and shouted out for help. By the time baby's mother arrived, the baby was either unconscious or dead. Without finding out what happened, the Otaibi family handed Nafeek to the Dawadami police, accusing her of strangling the baby.

As is usual practice with foreign workers, the Saudi police sided with the employer and did not provide Nafeek with an interpreter to explain what had happened. She was charged with murder by strangulation and forced to sign a confession. She made a similar confession during initial court proceedings, apparently under police duress.

Nafeek was only able to explain her side of the story with the aid of a translator at the Sri Lankan embassy in Riyadh. During the court hearing on February 3, she retracted her confession, telling the court she had been under threat from the police. The Dawadami court ignored the allegations of police intimidation, found her guilty and sentenced her to be beheaded.

Nafeek has until July 16 to file an appeal but she and her family cannot afford the legal fees. A Saudi law firm is demanding 250,000 Riyal (\$US67,000)—an astronomical sum for working people in Sri Lanka—to take the case. Nafeek's father has appealed to the Sri Lankan government to pay the legal fees, but it has so far refused. According to the state-owned *Daily News*, the Sri Lankan embassy in Riyadh is busy negotiating “a reduction in the fee demanded by the law firm in Riyadh”.

L.K. Ruhunuge, deputy general manager of the Sri Lanka Foreign Employment Bureau (SLFEB), told *Lakbima* the appeal was unnecessary as the case against Nafeek was so strong. When the WSWs rang the SLFEB, Ruhunuge was unavailable but another officer, who refused to identify himself, defended Ruhunuge's statement saying that it was not “worth spending such an amount because the legal firm in Saudi Arabia had not fully promised to free the girl”.

From the outset, the Sri Lankan government has abandoned Nafeek to her fate. Embassy officials in Saudi Arabia have confirmed they knew about the case, spoke to Saudi authorities in Dawadami and even attended court hearings, but have provided no assistance. After local and international human rights organisations criticised the Sri Lankan government, the July 9 issue of the *Daily News* reported the embassy's excuse: it has been unable to obtain the legal documents to file an appeal.

The reality is that the Colombo government is unwilling to do anything that might upset the lucrative trade in Sri Lankan cheap labour to the Middle East. The government's refusal to defend Nafeek is simply a particularly sharp example of its failure to prevent the gross exploitation of tens of thousands of contract workers.

In oil-rich Saudi Arabia, almost one third of the population of 24 million are foreigners, most of whom are from Asia and employed in menial labour. They have few rights under Saudi law, live in fear that their contracts will be terminated and are often ill-treated or not paid. Young women in particular are employed as domestic servants and treated as little more than slaves.

Nafeek is a case in point. A young Muslim from the eastern town of Muttur, she was desperate to escape and find a job. As emerged in court, she was only 17 when she arrived in Saudi Arabia. Her recruitment agent falsified her documents and obtained a passport overstating her age by six years. Once in Saudi Arabia, Nafeek was at the beck and call of her employer 24 hours a day. As well as a huge workload of daily chores including cleaning, cooking, washing and ironing, she had to look after the baby.

A family member Farina Nasik told the BBC: “Twenty eight days after Rizana left Sri Lanka, we received a letter from her saying that she had to look after ten children... She was not happy and wanted to change her employer.” She had to get up at three in the morning and work until late at night. It was her only letter.

Farina insisted on Nafeek’s innocence: “We could not believe this. We sent her to work because we do not have money. She is not a criminal, she is innocent.” Thaslim Muhammed Nishber, a Muttur resident, told the BBC: “The government should stop turning a blind eye to this and they should step in to stop these scandals.”

According to Amnesty International, nearly 100 people have been executed in Saudi Arabia in the first six months of this year, including three women. Half were foreign nationals, mostly from poor countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Last February four Sri Lankans—Victor Corea, Ranjith De Silva, Santhosh Kumar and Sharmila Sangeeth Kumar—were beheaded for robbery and possession of firearms. In a grotesque attempt to intimidate other foreign contract workers, Saudi authorities put the bodies of the executed men on public display.

Amnesty International repeatedly appealed against three death penalties, believing the fourth man had been sentenced to 15 years jail. The Sri Lankan government did nothing to defend the men. Sri Lanka Welfare Minister Keheliya Rambukwella defended the

executions, telling the media it was important not to violate Saudi Arabia’s domestic laws.

Amid growing anger in Sri Lanka over the treatment of foreign contract workers, the government has decided at the last minute to send Nafeek’s parents to Saudi Arabia along with Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Hussein Bhaila and a legal consultant. The trip is not to mount a legal defence of Nafeez but to make a personal appeal for clemency to the Saudi authorities and the family of the dead baby. As government spokesman Rambukwella explained to the *Asian Tribune*: “[T]he appeal is only a formality. It is not a form of an argument but only a form of a plea.”

The government’s main concern remains to prevent any rupture in the trade in contract labour. Last year remittances from overseas contract workers brought in \$2.3 billion, making it Sri Lanka’s top foreign exchange earner.



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