Mother of Sri Lankan worker facing Saudi death sentence speaks to WSWS

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Saudi Arabia's Supreme Court recently confirmed a death sentence imposed on Rizana Nafeek, a young Sri Lankan domestic servant. Nafeek left her village in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province in May 2005, at the age of 17. Her job agent persuaded her to alter her age in order to be eligible for employment. Just two weeks later, she was charged with murdering the four-month-old son of the family who employed her as a maid. (See: "Top Saudi court confirms death sentence on Sri Lankan worker")

A Saudi court found Nafeek guilty in July 2007 and sentenced her to death by beheading. The verdict was based on a confession extracted by the police. Abandoned by the Sri Lankan government, she received no legal assistance or competent translation in court. A legal appeal was finally launched with the assistance of the Asian Human Rights Commission. When she was provided a proficient translator, Nafeek denied the charges against her. She explained to the Supreme Court that the baby's death had been an accident—he choked while she was feeding him and she was unable to save him.

The Supreme Court rejected her account. Although appeals have been made to the Saudi king to halt her execution, he has not responded. Her plight illustrates the widespread intimidation of foreign workers who provide the Saudi elite with cheap labour. The Rajapakse government in Sri Lanka has remained callously indifferent to her frame-up because it does not want to disrupt one of its main sources of foreign exchange—remittances from workers living overseas. More than 500,000 Sri Lankans, mostly young, work in Saudi Arabia.

WSWS reporters recently visited Nafeek's village in the war-ravaged Eastern Province of Sri Lanka and spoke with her mother, friends and neighbours.

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Muttur is a town 280 kilometres from Colombo and 25 kilometres from Trincomalee, the capital of the eastern province—on the southern side of the Trincomalee Harbour. The ferry service to Muttur, which takes less than an hour from Trincomalee, has not been operating for about six months. Because of the poor state of the roads, WSWS reporters took more than two hours to travel from Trincomalee to Muttur, crossing three small rivers by barge.

Safi Nagar, where Nafeek lived, is one of the extremely impoverished Muslim villages in the Muttur district. The villagers' main sources of income are wood cutting for firewood, rice or vegetable cultivation, and raising cattle. Almost all the residents live in small huts with mud or brick walls and straw roofs.

Nafeek took a job in Saudi Arabia because she was desperate to earn money for herself and her family. Because they have no other way out of poverty, many young girls seek work in the Middle East, even though they have heard about the terrible conditions facing foreign workers.

When the WSWS team went to Nafeek's house, her mother Refeena Nafeek was washing cooking pans. Rizana Nafeek's two sisters and brother had gone to school and her father was at the hospital. Their house is just a shelter, with walls made of loosely placed bricks and a roof covered by straw.

Rafeena Nafeek was sad and fed up after waiting five years for the release of her eldest child. At first, she was reluctant to speak but later explained: "My poor girl is still in the prison at the doorsteps of her death. I have given numerous interviews. She had high hopes to help our family since we were living in poverty. Her first thoughts were a nice house and a good education for others in her family.

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"Some days after her leaving in 2005, 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." According to the letter, Rizana was overworked daily. She had to get up at three in the morning and work till late at night.

Then the Nafeek family was informed that she had been arrested by Saudi police on murder charges. In 2007, after she had been sentenced to death, Rizana's parents were taken to the prison in Riyadh to see their daughter. Rafeena cried and told us: "I am not a murderer."

Mohamed Jihad, a school teacher, knew the Nafeek family. He had taught at Safi Nagar Imam School when Rizana studied there. He commented: "The media mostly refer to the inhumane treatment of the housemaids by their masters and the ruthlessness of the judicial proceedings taken by the Saudi authorities against Rizana.

"Yes, the treatment by the Saudi masters is inhumane and the judicial proceedings are extremely unjust. At the same time, the question is: why did this young woman have to leave the country when she was as young as 17? Dire poverty forced her to leave school at Grade 9 and find a job to feed her family."

Because of the intolerable conditions in Sri Lanka, Mohamed explained, many young women, including under-age girls, went to the Middle East to work. He added: "Altering the date of birth is not a big deal for job agencies. They have done it for many under-age girls like Rizana Nafeek because they just want the money.

"Rizana was a beautiful, decent and innocent girl. She was very good at learning. Teachers named her as a prefect just before she left the school. If she had a chance she would definitely have continued higher studies."

Mohamed explained the conditions in the schools. Safi Nagar village Imam School is conducted in old buildings. For more than 300 children, there are only 13 teachers. After Grade 9, if students want to follow higher studies they have to walk two and half kilometres to the Almina School. Four classes in that school are conducted under trees. There are inadequate teachers in every school, particularly for English, science and maths.

A neighbour of the Nafeek family criticised the response of the Sri Lankan government. "We heard that the President [Mahinda Rajapakse] has sent a letter to the Saudi king requesting a pardon for this poor girl. It is just a gimmick." He accused the authorities of being concerned only about foreign revenue.

Condemning the Sri Lankan embassy in Saudi Arabia, he added: "They are not taking proper measures to protect the lives and the working conditions of the Sri Lankan immigrant workers. In Rizana Nafeek's case, they did not even follow the case closely or know about the death sentence until it was confirmed by the Supreme Court."

During the war between the Sri Lankan military and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), people lived in utter tension. They had to flee the Muttur area twice. The first was in 1987, when Indian forces that came to assist the Sri Lankan government and occupied the north and east. People fled to refugee camps.

Throughout the civil war, Safi Nagar was a border village. One side was under government rule. The other was controlled by the LTTE, which killed several villagers when they went to the jungle to collect firewood. Since the villagers were afraid to go wood cutting, their incomes fell rapidly.

In August 2006, after the Rajapakse government restarted the war in July that year, the military launched an offensive against the LTTE. People in the Muttur area, including Safi Nagar, fled—many just with the clothes they were wearing. They returned after the war was over in the East, but the living conditions have only worsened since.

Even after the war many people have been unable to cultivate their small plots, which are located away from their homes. The security forces have barred access, and residents suspect that the government is going to use the land for its own purposes.

Fareena, a housewife, expressed anger about the deteriorating conditions: "We thought that after ending the war the government would deliver a good time for us as they promised. But nothing has improved. Rather, it has become bitter. We thought that our husbands could do their wood cutting freely and earn a living. But still there is no demand for firewood and they have to sell it for a pittance. Amid the sky rocketing cost of living, our situation has become more and more helpless."

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