

Saudi Arabia executes young Sri Lankan housemaid

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On Wednesday, Saudi Arabian authorities beheaded 24-year-old Sri Lankan housemaid Rizana Nafeek, who had been convicted of murdering her employer's infant child. Nafeek denied the charge. Her plight has been widely condemned by human rights groups internationally and in Sri Lanka.

The execution exposes not only the reactionary character of the Saudi regime but also the callous attitude of Sri Lankan government toward the fate of hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Middle East.

The Sri Lankan foreign ministry issued a token condemnation on behalf of President Mahinda Rajapakse, stating: “[We] deplore the execution of Rizana Nafeek despite all efforts at the highest level of the government and the outcry of the people locally and internationally.” The parliament observed a minute's silence on Wednesday, then moved on to next business.

In reality, the Rajapakse government made no effort to help Nafeek with her legal defence. Even after a Saudi court sentenced her to death in 2007, the government refused to provide financial assistance for an appeal. Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare Minister Keheliya Rambukwella declared that it was “important not to violate Saudi Arabia's domestic laws.” The government's priority all along was to maintain good relations with the Saudi regime, and the flow of remittances from migrant workers back to Sri Lanka.

Nafeek was from a very poor family from a village in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province. In 2005 she left for the Middle East, at the age of 17, after a job agent persuaded her to alter her age in order to be eligible for employment. Although she had been promised a job as a housemaid in Saudi Arabia, she was forced to work as a babysitter, caring for a child without any experience or training. Just weeks later she was charged with murder after the infant died while she was bottle-feeding him.

A Saudi court convicted her on the basis of a so-called confession extracted by police. She had to face the court without the assistance of a lawyer or a professional translator. In her appeal before the Saudi Supreme Court, financially assisted by the Asian Human Rights Commission, she retracted her confession, saying it had been made under duress. She said the child had begun to choke during feeding and she had been unable to save him. The Supreme Court rejected her appeal and upheld her death sentence. It ignored the fact that she was just 17 when the incident took place.

The Rajapakse government's “efforts” to aid Nafeek were limited to visits by ministerial delegations and government officials to Saudi Arabia, a trip for her parents to see their imprisoned daughter and an appeal by Rajapakse to the Saudi king. The main purpose of these actions was to stem mounting criticism and protests in Colombo over Nafeek's death sentence.

Up until the last minute, the Sri Lankan government falsely claimed that Nafeek would be pardoned as a result of its negotiations with Saudi authorities. On January 5, the government-owned *Daily News* reported that Nafeek was “likely to receive a pardon,” according to the Saudi Ambassador in Sri Lanka. Following Nafeek's execution, Sri Lankan Justice Minister Rauf Hakeem declared that President Rajapakse and the government had done everything possible to secure a pardon for the young woman.

The Asian Human Rights Commission sheeted home the blame to the Sri Lankan government. It stated “categorically” that “the singular responsibility for this innocent young Sri Lankan woman's death is upon the President of Sri Lanka, Mr. Mahinda Rajapakse,” adding: “His office and the government led by him shamelessly neglected the life of this innocent Sri Lankan woman.” The commission declared that the Sri Lankan government had ignored calls for it to intervene and “did nothing,

except issuing valueless statements relating to this case.”

Nisha Varia, a senior researcher with the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW), said in a statement: “Rizana was just a child herself at the time of the baby’s death ... Saudi Arabia should recognise, as the rest of the world long has, that no child offender should ever be put to death.”

The HRW statement noted that Saudi Arabia had breached the terms of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which forbids the imposition of the death penalty for crimes committed before the age of 18. Saudi Arabia formally ratified the convention, but left the door open for exceptions when it conflicted with Islamic law. According to HRW, Saudi authorities executed at least 69 people last year.

Amnesty International reported that about one-half the people executed in Saudi Arabia annually were foreign nationals from developing nations.

Millions of foreign workers, a majority of whom come from South Asia, have few rights under Saudi law and are often ill-treated and not properly paid. Young women employed as domestic servants are treated as little more than slaves, forced to work long hours, and suffer psychological and physical abuse. South Asian governments turn a blind eye so as to ensure a good relationship with the Saudi regime and the continued flow of workers’ remittances.

Facing a balance of payments crisis, the Sri Lankan government is desperate to prevent any disruption to remittances, which constitute one of the country’s top foreign exchange earners. The *Daily News* reported on January 2 that migrant worker remittances were expected to surpass an unprecedented \$US6 billion at the end of 2012. It said the figure for the first eight months of last year was \$3.9 billion, “equivalent to 8.2 percent of GDP [gross domestic product], 25 percent of total government revenue and 35 percent of total foreign exchange earnings.”



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