

Sri Lankan housemaid faces execution in Saudi Arabia

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Saudi Arabian authorities are about to carry out another barbaric execution: the public stoning to death of a Sri Lankan domestic worker. The 45-year-old woman, who worked in Riyadh since 2013, was convicted by a Sharia court for alleged adultery last August.

The Saudi monarchy maintains these reactionary laws as part of its repressive rule directed particularly against the working class, including the country's estimated nine million foreign workers. This case also highlights the Sri Lankan government's disregard for the plight of hundreds of thousands of citizens working in the Middle East.

The woman, whose name has been withheld by the Sri Lankan government and media, is reportedly a mother of three from Colombo. She went to Saudi Arabia to work as a housemaid in 2013. In 2014, she was arrested for allegedly committing adultery and after a trial beginning in March 2014 was found guilty of the charge.

The Colombo-based *Sunday Leader*, however, reported that the convicted woman had told her husband that she fled her employer because of unbearable living conditions and was arrested by police. Her husband sought the help of the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) by lodging a complaint.

The plight of the woman has been widely condemned by human rights groups in Sri Lanka and internationally. In response, the Sri Lankan government has made token efforts to intervene on her behalf. SLBFE spokesman Upul Deshapriya told *Arab News* that the government has contacted the Saudi authorities to seek a review of the death sentence.

Nalin Rajapakse, media secretary for Foreign Employment Minister Thalatha Athukorala, said that since the maid had already pleaded guilty, the conviction could not be overturned. He said the minister had hired a lawyer and filed an appeal before the Riyadh Court requesting that it reduce the punishment."

The government's priority, however, is to maintain

good relations with the Saudi regime and thus the flow of remittances from migrant workers back to Sri Lanka. The attitude of President Maithripala Sirisena and the present government is no different to that of the previous government of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

In 2013, Saudi Authorities beheaded a young Sri Lankan housemaid Rizana Nafeek, who had been convicted for murdering employer's infant child. The Rajapakse government made no effort to help in her legal defence or to prevent the execution. Nafeek had no training in looking after infants and evidence came to light that the death had been accidental.

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."

Tens of thousands of poverty-stricken male and female workers seek jobs in Middle Eastern countries. According to Central Bank of Sri Lanka statistics, 279,952 Sri Lankans went to work in Middle East in 2014. Total remittances from migrant workers were more than \$7 billion in 2014, mainly from Middle Eastern countries. Remittances account for about 9 percent of Sri Lanka's gross domestic product.

One of the main destinations of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from South Asia is Saudi Arabia. Under that country's law, workers have virtually no rights. Domestic workers in particular are ill-treated, work as slaves and are not properly paid.

Indonesia announced in May that it had decided not to send workers to Middle East countries after two of housemaids were executed after being found guilty of murder. The Indonesian government, which was seeking to deflect the mass outrage over the executions, said its decision would be implemented in 15 months. Like Sri Lanka, Indonesia is dependent on migrant workers as a

lucrative source of foreign exchange.

Foreign workers are particularly vulnerable as they do not read or speak Arabic. According to Amnesty International, they are not provided with adequate translations of the proceedings in court.

James Lynch, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Program, commented: "The Saudi Arabian authorities appear intent on continuing a bloody execution spree which has seen at least 151 people put to death so far this year—an average of one person every two days." In 2014, according to Amnesty International, the total number of executions carried out in Saudi Arabia was 90.

"The use of the death penalty is abhorrent in any circumstance but it is especially alarming that the Saudi Arabian authorities continue to use it in violation of international human rights law and standards, on such a wide scale, and after trials which are grossly unfair and sometimes politically motivated," Lynch said.

As for the Sri Lankan government, it is seeking to defuse mounting public anger over the looming execution, while ensuring not to offend the Saudi regime. Sri Lankan Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Azmi Thassim, told *Arab News* that authorities were "vigilant about the progress of the appeal made to the Saudi Court of Appeal" and hoped that "the sentence would be lessened."

At the same time, Thassim found fault with the Sri Lankan media for criticising Saudi laws. He also implied that the 45-year-old woman was responsible for her own fate. "The problem lies with the lack of awareness of local laws. If someone is not happy with the laws of the Kingdom, they should choose not to come," he said.



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