

UN calls on Saudi Arabia to release jailed human rights defenders, including women activists

Concerned over the continuing arrests and “apparently arbitrary detentions” of human rights defenders – including campaigners who lobbied for an end to the ban on women driving – the United Nations human rights office (OHCHR) on Tuesday called on Saudi Arabia to “unconditionally” release all those being held.

Since 15 May, at least 15 Government critics have been detained, Ravina Shamdasani, OHCHR Spokesperson told a press briefing in Geneva.

“We understand that eight of them were later [temporarily released](#) until the completion of their procedural review,” Ms. Shamdasani said, noting that in some cases, “their whereabouts are unknown and there is a serious lack of transparency” in processing their cases.

In mid-May, a crackdown on prominent women’s rights defenders in Saudi Arabia seems to have kicked off a spate of arrests. In June, after an official visit, Ben Emmerson, UN special rapporteur on anti-terrorism, painted a [damning picture](#) of a country which he said was using anti-terror laws to systematically justify torture, suppress dissent and imprison human rights defenders.

“While the authorities have made statements about possible serious charges, that could lead to prison terms of up to 20 years, it is unclear whether charges have been laid in any of these cases,” Ms. Shamdasani continued.

Among those who reportedly remain imprisoned are Hatoon al-Fassi, a leading voice for women’s rights, and one of the first women to acquire a Saudi drivers’ license after the ban was lifted in late June.

“She was detained between 21 and 24 June,” continued the spokesperson. Others in detention include human rights defender Khaled Al-Omar – who has not been contactable since he was imprisoned on 6 July – as well as women’s rights activists Loujain al-Hathloul, Eman al-Nafjan, Aziza al-Yousef, Nouf Abdelaziz and Mayaa al-Zahrani. 80-year old lawyer Ibrahim al-Modaimegh, and activist Abdulaziz Meshaal are also imprisoned, said Ms. Shamdasani.

She underscored that OHCHR urges the Government to “unconditionally release all human rights defenders and activists who have been detained for their peaceful human rights work, including their decades-long campaigns for the lifting of the driving ban for women.”

Stressing that investigations must be held in a transparent manner, with full respect for due process rights, Ms. Shamdasani concluded by spelling out that “all human rights defenders should be able to carry out their crucial human

rights work without fear of reprisals or prosecution.”