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Fourth UA: 14/24 Index: MDE 23/8490/2024 Saudi Arabia of September 6, 2024

SAUDI ARABIA ACTIVIST MANAHEL AL-OTAIBI SUBJECTED TO TORTURE IN PRISON

Manahel al-Otaibi, a 30-year-old fitness instructor and women's rights activist, contacted her family on September 1, 2024, after a month of incommunicado detention. She revealed that she was once again being held in solitary confinement and had been brutally beaten by both fellow prisoners and prison guards.

On January 9, 2024, Saudi Arabia's Specialized Criminal Court sentenced al-Otaibi to 11 years in prison for "terrorist offenses." The secret trial accused her of violating the Anti-Cyber Crime Law due to tweets supporting women's rights and for posting photos of herself at a mall without wearing an abaya on Snapchat. She was arrested on November 16, 2022.

Between November 5, 2023, and April 14, 2024, Saudi authorities forcibly disappeared al-Otaibi, leaving her family without any information about her whereabouts during that time.

Write to the Saudi Minister for Justice urging him to:

- Order the immediate and unconditional release of Manahel al-Otaibi, as she has been convicted solely for peacefully exercising her right to freedom of expression.
- Grant her immediate access to medical care while she remains in detention.
- Impartially investigate her allegations of torture and other ill-treatment.

Write to:

Waleed Mohammed Al Smani
Minister of Justice
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
Postal Code 11472, P.O.Box 7775
Email: minister-office@moj.gov.sa
Salutation: Your Excellency,

And copy:

Her Excellency Amal Yahya ALMOALIMI
Ambassador
Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia
201 Sussex Drive
Ottawa, ON K1N 1K6
Tel: (613) 237-4100 Fax: (613) 237-0567
Email: caemb@mofa.gov.sa

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Manahel al-Otaibi was arrested on November 16, 2022, for violating Saudi Arabia's Anti-Cyber Crime Law. She was charged for tweeting in support of women's rights and posting photos on Snapchat without wearing traditional clothing. On January 23, 2023, the Criminal Court in Riyadh referred her case to the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC), a notorious terrorism court. She was accused of promoting content that allegedly encouraged the rejection of religious principles and societal values, primarily due to her social media posts advocating for the end of male guardianship in Saudi Arabia.

Between November 5, 2023, and April 14, 2024, Saudi authorities forcibly disappeared al-Otaibi. On April 14, 2024, she contacted her family, revealing she had been held in solitary confinement in al-Malaz Prison. She reported having a broken leg due to a brutal beating and being denied medical care. This extended period of disappearance and abuse highlights the harsh conditions many women's rights activists face in Saudi prisons.

The Specialized Criminal Court has been widely criticized for equating peaceful activism with terrorism. Since 2018, Saudi authorities have targeted women's rights activists, arbitrarily detaining those who campaigned against male guardianship and for the right to drive. Activists, including al-Otaibi, have been subjected to torture, sexual harassment, and ill-treatment. Even those released face travel bans and restrictions on their freedom of expression. Al-Otaibi's sisters, Fawzia and Mariam, have also faced charges related to their advocacy for women's rights. Mariam is currently under a travel ban for her activism.

The case of Manahel al-Otaibi is part of a larger pattern of persecution in Saudi Arabia. Salma al-Shehab, a PhD student, was sentenced to 27 years in prison for supporting women's rights on social media. As of January 2024, Amnesty International has documented 69 cases of individuals prosecuted for exercising their rights to free expression, assembly, or association. Of those, 32 were targeted for their social media activity. The real number of such prosecutions is likely much higher.

Please take action as soon as possible until March 6, 2025! The UA will be duly updated should there be the need for further action.