

washingtonpost.com

U.S. offers mild criticism in Saudi rape case

Advertisement

By Sue Fleming

Reuters

Monday, November 19, 2007; 4:04 PM

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The United States, which wants [Saudi Arabia](#) to attend a Middle East conference next week, gave only mild criticism on Monday of a Saudi court's order to double the number of lashings for a gang rape victim.

"This is a part of a judicial procedure overseas in the court of a sovereign country," said State Department spokesman Sean McCormack when asked to comment on the case.

"That said, most would find this relatively astonishing that something like this happens," added McCormack.

But McCormack declined to directly criticize its close ally, or the Saudi legal system, which has made a series of erratic verdicts in recent months.

"I don't have anything else to offer," said McCormack when pressed on whether Washington condemned the court's decision and to explain what he meant by saying people would find such verdicts "relatively astonishing."

Asked whether the Saudi authorities should reconsider the sentence against the woman, McCormack said he could not "get involved in specific court cases in Saudi Arabia dealing with its own citizens."

The 19-year-old Shi'ite woman from the town of Qatif in the Eastern Province was raped by seven men in 2006. A court had originally sentenced the woman to 90 lashes and the rapists to jail terms of between 10 months and five years.

But the victim's lawyer told Reuters last week the court had increased her sentence to 200 lashes and six months in prison. He said the court had blamed the woman for being alone with unrelated men.

LETTER TO RICE

Clerics who adhere to Saudi Arabia's austere Sunni form of Islamic Sharia law dominate the legal system, with Shi'ite Muslims also judged according to Sunni Islamic law.

The United States has been criticized in the past for not being outspoken enough about human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia, a close U.S. ally.

Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama wrote to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Monday urging her to address human rights problems in Saudi Arabia and to condemn the sentencing of the rape victim.

"That the victim was sentenced at all is unjust, but that the court doubled the sentence because of efforts to call attention to the ruling is beyond unjust," wrote the Illinois senator.

He also urged the State Department to give this "demeaning ruling" a prominent place in its annual human rights report of abuses worldwide, which is now being compiled.

Tom Malinowski, Washington advocacy director for the group Human Rights Watch, said the State Department's refusal to strongly criticize the Saudi court's actions was "silly."

The argument that the State Department did not comment on judicial procedures in sovereign countries was untrue, added Malinowski, pointing to criticism last month after the sentencing of a journalist in Azerbaijan.

"The administration does need to be careful in how it calls on Saudi Arabia to change these practices. But Saudi sovereignty is no excuse for not trying," Malinowski said.

The United States wants Saudi Arabia to attend a Middle East peace conference in Annapolis next week which Washington hopes will launch negotiations on Palestinian statehood.

Saudi Arabia has so far been noncommittal over whether it will attend.

(Reporting by Sue Fleming; Editing by Stuart Grudgings)

© 2007 Reuters

Ads by Google

[Learn Arabic](#)

Learn Arabic online using newspaper articles with sound
www.naturalarabic.com

[Expert Arabic Instruction](#)

Standard & dialect classes in downtown SF, great tuition rates.
www.pacificarabic.com

[Online Religious Books](#)

Jewish Study, Hebrew Books & Online Lessons. Order Today!
www.m7000.com
