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Attorney for Rape Victim Is Suing Saudi Justice Ministry

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Washington Post Foreign Service
Thursday, November 29, 2007; A18

JIDDAH, [Saudi Arabia](#), Nov. 28 -- A human rights lawyer who has defended a gang-rape victim sentenced to jail time and lashes said Wednesday that he is suing the Justice Ministry for revoking his license and for defaming his client by accusing her of having an affair.

Abdul-Rahman al-Lahem's license was suspended this month in the eastern town of Qatif, where his client was sentenced to six months in jail and 200 lashes on a morals charge after she and a male companion were kidnapped by seven men and raped.

The Justice Ministry said in a statement last week that the 20-year-old married woman had "confessed to having an affair with the man she was caught with." The statement also said she was not fully clothed when she and her male companion were seized at knifepoint.

"The Justice Ministry's accusing my client of adultery, without proof, is illegal. It is a crime, and they, better than anyone else, should know that," Lahem said. "I am suing them to protect my client's honor and because no one, including the Justice Ministry, should be above the law."

The Saudi National Human Rights Association, a government-financed group, has requested an explanation for the revocation of Lahem's license by the Qatif court.

"We are questioning the legality of them taking his permit," said Saleh al-Khathlan, a member of the group. "We are hoping that this is not a reaction to his being so active in the field of human rights and his criticisms of the system, and that they're not trying to punish him for being so outspoken."

The victim, known only as the Girl of Qatif, her home town, was in a car with the male acquaintance, trying to retrieve old pictures of herself, when the attack occurred last year, Lahem said.

The woman and her companion were originally sentenced to 90 lashes for being alone in a car, illegal in this strictly gender-segregated country because they are not related. The rapists received sentences ranging from 10 months to five years.

When the sentences were appealed, a superior court increased the punishment of both victims and nearly doubled the rapists' sentences.

Lashes are usually administered 50 at a time in a private room in prison.

The judiciary has accused Lahem, 36, of ignorance of the law, disrespecting the courts and seeking undue media attention.

On a satellite television program Tuesday, Abdul-Mohsen al-Obaikan, a Justice Ministry consultant and former judge, said the woman was to blame for the sentences, which he described as lenient. "Nobody accepts that his wife cheats on him, and that she betrays her marital vows and sullies her marital bed," he said.

Obaikan said that the woman and her companion both confessed and that she was not sentenced to a harsher punishment for adultery because of the extenuating circumstances.

Midway through the show, the woman's husband called in, saying his wife was guilty only of trying to get her photos back. "I have forgiven her for that. I know why she was there. Why can't you forgive?" he asked.

The woman's husband, who also has not been identified, said in a telephone interview that his wife has tried to kill herself several times and is taking medication to treat depression brought on by the rape.

"We are keeping all the latest statements away from her because she is still traumatized by what happened. She just sits for hours, quiet, alone," he said.

The case has put a spotlight on the Saudi judicial system, which is run in accordance with the country's official Wahhabi school of thought, a strict form of Islam. The kingdom follows Islamic law, or sharia, and many sentences are left to the discretion of judges, a practice recently criticized by a growing number of Saudis.

The foreign minister, [Prince Saud al-Faisal](#), speaking Tuesday from [Annapolis](#), where he was attending a U.S.-hosted conference on [Middle East](#) peace, said the judiciary would review the case, the official [Saudi Press Agency](#) reported.

[King Abdullah](#), who took the throne in 2005, has tried to introduce political and judicial reform and has allowed greater press freedoms. Discussion of rape cases in the news media is thought by some Saudis to have led to the opening of the country's first rape clinic in the capital, [Riyadh](#), last year.

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