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## Pardon Reported for Saudi Rape Victim

By KATHERINE ZOEPF

RIYADH, [Saudi Arabia](#) — King Abdullah has pardoned a woman who was sentenced to 200 lashes after pressing charges against seven men who raped her, a Saudi newspaper reported Monday.

There was no immediate confirmation from the Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of Information, but the newspaper, Al Jazirah, is close to the religious establishment that controls the Justice Ministry, Reuters reported.

The case has provoked a rare and angry public debate in Saudi Arabia, leading to renewed calls for reform of the Saudi judicial system.

The rape took place a year and a half ago in Qatif, a small Shiite town in the Eastern Province, center of the Saudi Arabia's oil industry. The woman, who has been publicly identified only as the "Qatif girl," said she met a former boyfriend to retrieve a photograph of herself. They were sitting in a car together when seven men attacked, raping them both.

The woman and the former boyfriend were originally sentenced to 90 lashes each for being together in private, while the attackers received sentences ranging from 10 months to five years in prison, and 80 to 1,000 lashes each. For a woman to be in seclusion with a man who is not her husband or a relative is a crime in Saudi Arabia, whose legal code is based on a strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic law.

Her lawyer, Abdulrahman al-Lahem, a well-known human rights activist, appealed, saying the attackers' sentences were too lenient and that of the victim was too harsh. The appeal brought down the wrath of the court. In November, it doubled the woman's sentence and stripped Mr. Lahem of his license to practice, but also increased the sentences of her attackers to prison terms of two to nine years.

Mr. Lahem could not be reached by phone late Monday, but the editor in chief of Al Watan, a leading Saudi daily that Mr. Lahem writes for, said that it has been known in Riyadh political circles since early this month that the woman would be pardoned. The editor, Jamal Khashoggi, said he believed that the timing of the pardon, on the eve of the Id al-Adha holiday, was coincidental.

"I've been hearing for two or three weeks now that the pardon would be issued," Mr. Khashoggi said in a telephone interview.

"It has been expected that the girl would be pardoned in the end — in similar cases, very public cases like this, it has been the same. One of our writers was recently sentenced to a number of lashes and received a pardon from the king."

Mr. Khashoggi said that the woman, who has married, had been living freely while her case was being appealed. There have been reports that her brother has tried to kill her to remove the "stain" to the family's honor, and bloggers and international human rights activists have expressed concern for her safety.

The Saudi minister of social affairs, Dr. Abdul Mohsin Alakkas, reached by telephone, said that Saudi women who run into trouble with the law frequently fear retribution from their relatives. Some women who serve prison time refuse to leave prison at the end of their sentences, he said. The Ministry of Social Affairs operates special shelters for these women, and Dr. Alakkas said the Qatif victim would be able to live in one.

"If after the pardon she decides that she needs housing because of her circumstances, then we will offer that," he said.

Commenting on the pardon, the Saudi justice minister, Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Sheik, told Al Jazirah that the king fully supported the verdicts against the woman but had decided to pardon her because it was in the "interests of the people."

Bernard Haykel, a professor of Near Eastern studies at [Princeton University](#) who specializes in Saudi Arabia, said that this is a

kind of “double message” that is commonly employed by the Saudi government.

“On one hand this tells people, ‘We support our system and we will punish you if you violate it,’ ” he said. “Yet he’s also showing mercy. Throughout, he’s making it clear that he is not disagreeing with the judge’s opinion on this sensitive issue of sexual chastity, but he believes that there is a higher interest to be served by the pardon, whether that’s relationships between Shiites and Sunnis, or international opinion.”

“Conservative scholars and judges will still take this pardon as a slap in the face,” Dr. Haykel continued.

“These decisions are always made like this, ad hoc, so that the core values and institutions of the Saudi state are not questioned or threatened.”

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