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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

7 August 2018

Front Line Defenders calls on the EU and European Foreign Ministers to Follow Canada’s Lead, Condemn Women’s Rights Crackdown in Saudi Arabia

Front Line Defenders has strongly condemned the detention of women’s rights defenders in Saudi Arabia, and called on EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and the Foreign Ministers of EU Member States to follow the lead of the Canadian Foreign Ministry in urging the release of jailed women activists.

Last week Canada’s Foreign Ministry [called](#) on Saudi Arabia to immediately release detained woman human rights defender Samar Badawi, the latest arrest in an unprecedented crackdown on women’s rights leaders that began on 15 May. More than 15 human rights defenders have been arrested, detained and interrogated in a repressive campaign that began just weeks before the widely celebrated lifting of the driving ban.

After Canada voiced support for the peaceful activists, Saudi Arabia responded with a stream of denial and threats on Twitter, following which Canada [reiterated](#) its support for women’s rights defenders in the Kingdom.

Front Line Defenders today called on the EU and Foreign Ministers of its Member States to affirm their support for women’s rights in the Kingdom by urging the government to release and immediately end the persecution of the country’s peaceful activists.

“The Saudi regime has long viewed women’s political agency as a direct threat to their authoritarian rule,” said Andrew Anderson, Executive Director of Front Line Defenders. “Women human rights defenders were the driving force behind many of the major ‘reforms’ brought about by the Crown Prince, but they are now being hunted down and jailed while he takes credit on the international stage.”

Saudi Arabia’s purge of women human rights defenders spiked amidst Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman’s wave of reforms including lifting the world’s only gendered driving ban, allowing women to attend sporting events and reopening cinemas across the country. At the same time, the Crown Prince has overseen an unprecedented attack on women human rights defenders, who report facing a higher risk of arrest, incommunicado detention, and abuse by security forces.

While some of those detained since May have been released on bail, more than half are still behind bars.¹ Reports continue to emerge of detainees’ families being threatened into silence about the activists’ treatment in detention, and several more prominent women’s rights defenders and

1 Women human rights defenders still in detention include Nouf Abdulaziz Al-Dosari, Amal al-Harbi, Loujain al-Hathloul, Azziza al-Yousef, Iman al-Nafjan, Maya’a al-Zahrani, Samar Badawi, Nassima Al-Sadah, and Hatoon AlFassi. WHRDs Aisha AlMana, Hessa AlShaikh, Ala’a Al-Shubbar and Madeha Al-Jroush were released on bail but may still face charges.

academics have had travel bans placed on them for their prominent role in the driving campaign. Those in detention face charges including undermining “state security.”

“Saudi’s Western allies and trading partners need to ask themselves what sort of security is ‘undermined’ by women’s rights,” said Andrew Anderson. “Defenders have been very clear this week that the EU and its Member States need to follow Canada’s lead, and not allow themselves to be threatened into silence.”

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