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PRESS RELEASE

Saudi Arabia: Men ‘Behaving Like Women’ Face Flogging

Sentences Imposed for Alleged Homosexual Conduct Violate Basic Rights

(Geneva, April 7, 2005)-- In sentencing more than 100 men to imprisonment and flogging after unfair trials for reputed homosexual conduct, Saudi Arabia has advertised its contempt for the basic rights to privacy, fair trials and freedom from torture, Human Rights Watch and the International Commission of Jurists said today.

Security police arrested the men on March 10 at a private party held in a rented hall in Jeddah. The government-affiliated newspaper Al-Wifaq reported that the men at the party were dancing and “behaving like women.” □

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“Prosecuting and imprisoning people for homosexual conduct are flagrant human rights violations,” said Scott Long, director of Human Rights Watch’s Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights Program. “Subjecting the victims to floggings is torture, pure and simple.” □

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On or about March 26, a Jeddah court, meeting in a closed session in which defense attorneys were excluded, sentenced 31 of the men to prison for six months to one year, and to 200 lashes each, for unreported offenses. Four other men received two years’ imprisonment and 2,000 lashes. Police released more than 70 of the men not long after their initial arrest; reports in the Saudi press suggested that personal contacts with the government had intervened on their behalf. However, on April 3, police summoned the 70 men back to a local police station and informed them that they had been sentenced to one year’s imprisonment. □

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Shari’a law, as interpreted and enforced in Saudi Arabia, allows sentences ranging from imprisonment and flogging to death for “deviant sexual behavior.” Al-Wifaq claimed that the men seized at the gathering had been holding a “gay wedding.” One friend of an arrested man denied this to Human Rights Watch, saying the gathering was a birthday party. The newspaper’s assertion echoed claims made by Egyptian media that the 2001 “Queen Boat” raid in Cairo, in

which security forces arrested and tortured dozens, was prompted by a wedding between two men. □

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which reflects customary international law, prohibits interference with the right to privacy and unfair trials. The Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment—to which Saudi Arabia is a party—prohibits the use of flogging as a punishment. □

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“These convictions and sentences are unacceptable—and imposing them based on the victims’ real or perceived sexual orientation, or their consensual sexual conduct, is worse,” said Nicholas Howen, secretary-general of the International Commission of Jurists. “Saudi Arabia is a member of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. We call on the government to stop these practices, which disregard basic principles of human rights law that all members of the Commission should uphold.” □

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“These trials violate the right to privacy, and make a mockery of the rule of law,” said Long. “The brutal sentences call into question the Saudi government’s recent promises of reform.” □

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