

Saudi Arabia's treatment of Ethiopians has been shameful

<http://www.montrealgazette.com/news/Saudi+Arabia+treatment+Ethiopians+been+shameful/9364367/>

By Semahagn G. Abebe, Special to The Gazette January 8, 2014

The Saudi government certainly didn't waste any time. As soon as the seven-month warning period for expatriate workers expired in November, officials rounded up tens of thousands of illegal immigrants, many of them facing violence, rape and torture at the hands of police and vigilante groups throughout the crackdown.

Images circulated on social media that showed Saudi citizens lending support to their police force, participating in vigilantism, or simply cheering and watching the drama unfold from a distance. Ethiopian migrants were mercilessly beaten, tortured and raped by Saudi police and civilians during the crackdown. At least three Ethiopians were brutally killed and hundreds more beaten by Saudi security forces. Tens of thousands of workers, including children, were held in detention centres without adequate food, shelter or medical care, before being sent home.

By the beginning of this year, almost 150,000 Ethiopians had been expelled from Saudi Arabia. This is economically catastrophic not only for the workers, but for the extended families that had been supported by their remittances.

The pretext of the Saudi government for the barbaric crackdown against foreign workers is to combat high levels of unemployment among Saudi citizens by opening jobs previously filled by undocumented workers. Those targeted include people without the proper residency or work permits, and those caught working for an employer who is not their legal sponsor. The crackdown hit Ethiopians particularly hard, as they had stayed behind as nationals of many other countries had been helped to leave Saudi Arabia by their own governments during the warning period.

The accounts of the victims are extremely distressing. A 26-year-old undocumented day labourer told Human Rights Watch that he was among a group of 23 Ethiopians in a private home when a group of 20 young men armed with machetes and pistols broke down the door and attacked the people inside. He and five other Ethiopians escaped by climbing to the roof, but he does not know what happened to the other 17 men.

Despite it all, the Ethiopian government has paid precious little attention to the suffering of Ethiopian immigrants in the Middle East, and the response of the international community and western media to the crisis in Saudi Arabia has been inadequate. The silence of powerful governments, multilateral organizations and major media outlets perpetuates the message that it is acceptable for Saudi authorities to continue the violent treatment of foreign workers.

Tens of thousands of Ethiopians flee their country every year because of worsening living conditions and the repressive regime. According to Ethiopia's Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, approximately 200,000 women sought employment abroad in 2012, the vast majority of them in the Middle East. The real figure could be more than double that, considering that most of the illegal immigrants cross the borders without passing through any documentation process. For years, the Ethiopian government has completely failed to take such steps as creating jobs and ensuring good governance in the country, which would curb the surge in emigration.

The suffering of Ethiopian immigrants at the hands of Saudi authorities was made worse by the failure of Ethiopian diplomatic offices to provide effective protection. Not only has the Ethiopian government failed to denounce the violent crackdown in the strongest terms, but police arrested dozens of demonstrators outside the Saudi embassy in the capital Addis Ababa as they protested against attacks on Ethiopian immigrants in Saudi Arabia.

It is time for the international community to urge Saudi authorities to treat immigrant workers in accordance with international human rights standards. Saudi authorities should cease all forms of violence against immigrant workers, investigate assaults on Ethiopian and other migrant workers, and bring perpetrators to justice.

The international community should condemn this barbaric act in the strongest possible terms and pressure the Saudi government to improve the way in which immigrant workers are treated in the country. In addition, international organizations and the donor community should respond urgently to appeals by humanitarian organizations for financial assistance to help resettle and rehabilitate returnees.

Semahagn G. Abebe is an O'Brien Fellow in Residence at the Centre for Human Rights and Legal Pluralism in the Faculty of Law at McGill University.

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette