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Saudis: Rape victim deserved flogging for adultery

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia (AP) — The Saudi Justice Ministry announced that a girl gang raped by seven men and then sentenced to six months prison and 200 lashes for adultery had confessed to cheating on her husband, in its latest response to the negative international reaction to the incident.

The statement, which was carried by the Saudi Press Agency late on Saturday, confirmed that the flogging sentence against the rape victim would be carried out and condemned foreign interference.

"The Saudi justice minister expressed his regret about the media reports over the role of the women in this case which put out false information and wrongly defend her," said the statement. "The charged girl is a married woman who confessed to having an affair with the man she was caught with."

In 2006 a Shiite Saudi 19-year-old, known only as the "Girl from Qatif," said she had recently been married and met a high school friend in his car to retrieve a picture of herself from him. While in a car with him, two men got into the vehicle and drove them to a secluded area where others waited, and then she and her companion were both raped.

She was sentenced to prison and 90 lashes for being alone with a man not related to her and when her lawyer, Abdul Rahman al-Lahem, appealed the sentence, he was removed from the case, his license suspended and the penalty doubled to 200.

The increase in sentence received heavy coverage by the international media and prompted expressions of astonishment from the U.S. government, while Canada called it "barbaric."

The Justice Ministry maintained, however, that the ruling was legal and followed the "the book of God and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad," noting that she had "confessed to doing what God has forbidden."

The ministry added that the woman and her husband were "convinced on the verdict and agreed to it."

The alleged rape has triggered a rare debate about Saudi Arabia's legal system, in which judges have wide discretion in punishing a criminal, rules of evidence are shaky and sometimes no lawyers are present.

Justice in Saudi Arabia is administered by a system of religious courts according to the kingdom's strict interpretation of Islamic Sharia law. Judges — appointed by the king on the recommendation of the Supreme Judicial Council — have complete discretion to set sentences, except in cases where Sharia outlines a punishment, such as capital crimes.

That means that no two judges would likely hand down the same verdict for similar crimes. A rapist, for instance, could receive anywhere from a light or no sentence to death, depending on the judge's discretion.

The Justice Ministry's account of the incident differed substantially from that given by the woman and her lawyer and largely glosses over her rape by seven men, focusing instead on her plan to meet her lover for tryst in his car "in a dark place where they stayed for a while."

"Then they where spotted by the other defendants as the woman was in an indecent condition as she had tossed away her clothes, then the assault occurred on her and the man," the statement added.

Under Saudi Arabia's strict interpretation of Islamic Sharia law, women are not allowed in public in the company of men other than their male relatives. Also, women in Saudi Arabia are often sentenced to flogging for adultery and other crimes.

The seven men convicted of raping the woman were given prison sentences of two to nine years. The initial sentences for the men convicted of the gang rape ranged from 10 months to five years in prison.

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