

Amnesty International condemns treatment of women in Saudi Arabia

CAIRO, Egypt (AP) - Women in Saudi Arabia are accused of morality crimes more often than men and face additional obstacles in defending their virtue, according to a recent Amnesty International report on discrimination against women in the conservative kingdom.

Limitations on women's movement and interaction with men puts them at a disadvantage during interrogations, making them vulnerable to be intimidated into confessions, according to the London-based human rights group's report released Wednesday and posted on its web site, www.amnestyusa.org.

The report was monitored in Cairo late Thursday night, when Saudi officials could not be contacted. In the past, Saudi Arabia consistently has dismissed accusations it violates people's rights and has described its critics _ of which Amnesty is one of

the most prominent and persistent _ as enemies of Islam.

Amnesty said that although an "encouraging" debate is emerging in Saudi Arabia on women's rights, Saudi and female foreign nationals in the kingdom remain discriminated against in employment, education, decision-making and the judicial system.

Saudi Arabia agreed Monday to join the U.N.-sponsored Convention of Eradication of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, which promotes equal opportunities for women. However, the government warned it wouldn't comply with articles it considers contradictory to Islamic law.

Amnesty said it welcomed the decision to join the 20-year-old treaty, but said it hoped the "sweeping reservations" wouldn't be used to undermine the value and intent of the Convention.

Though men also face trials that Amnesty long has maintained don't meet the basic standards for fairness, the group said women enter the criminal justice system disadvantaged by systematic discrimination in society. Unrelated women and men rarely mix in Saudi Arabia.

"Women are invariably interrogated by men," Amnesty said. "Having no previous contact with unrelated men, they are consequently vulnerable to being intimidated into giving confessions, which are used as a sole evidence for conviction and punishment."

Amnesty said "many cases show that 'crimes' of immoral conduct, although appearing gender-neutral, are invoked against women in more circumstances than against men." Such crimes often are punished by floggings, which Amnesty considers torture.

Punishment in Saudi Arabia follows

a strict interpretation of Islamic law that calls for death sentences for murder, rape, drug trafficking and armed robbery. Twenty-eight women are known to have been executed in Saudi Arabia since 1990, including 17 foreign nationals, Amnesty said.

This year, at least three women have been among at least 105 people executed in the kingdom, one convicted of heroin smuggling and two convicted of murder.

Amesty also criticized the kingdom for requiring women to be represented by a man in business decisions, and said gender segregation often limits women's opportunities. Female domestic workers, often foreign nationals, are particularly vulnerable to abuse by their employers, Amnesty said, citing the case of an Indonesian woman it said was abused and threatened by police when she sought help.

Fighting rages on in Burundi

BUJUMBURA, Burundi (AP) - Gunfire and grenade explosions killed five rebels, wounded four soldiers and sent hundreds of people fleeing the northern neighborhoods of Burundi's capital Friday in a rebel attack against an army outpost, officials said.

The attack, which residents said rebels launched late Thursday against the outpost next to a bus station in Gasenyi, came amid reports that the leaders of the two main rebel groups have rejected a proposed peace plan for this Central African nation.

Government and rebel fighters fought with assault rifles, grenades and mortars throughout the night, and sporadic gunfire could still be heard Friday morning.

"It is not the time to make an assessment, but what we saw on the field were four soldiers wounded in the attack and five rebels killed. The military operations to chase the rebels continue," said Col. Twagiramungu, Burundi's interior minister.

Hundreds fled their homes and soldiers sealed off Gasenyi and neighboring Kamenge, allowing residents out but denying access to journalists. There were no immediate reports of casualties in what appeared to be intense fighting.

The peace process also reportedly suffered a setback this week when the leaders of Burundi's two Hutu rebel groups rejected a power-sharing deal and a cease-fire proposed by former South African President Nelson Mandela, according to The Guardian, a Tanzanian daily.

Burundi's civil war started in 1993 when paratroopers from the Tutsi-dominated army killed the nation's

first democratically elected president, a Hutu. More than 200,000 people, mostly civilians, have been killed.

The rebels have demanded that the Tutsi elite give up their hold on the government and that the army and redistribute power based on a census conducted in the 1930s that showed the population as 85 percent Hutu, 14 percent Tutsi and 1 percent Twa.

The Guardian, quoting sources involved in the peace process, said Jean-Bosco Ndayikengurukiye of the Forces for the Defense of Democracy and Kabura Cossan of the Forces for National Liberation had both rejected the deal reached Aug. 28 between the government, the army, seven Hutu political parties and 10 Tutsi groups.

The agreement calls for a balanced legislature, army and government with strong protections for the Tutsi minority. The peace process has been under way in the northern Tanzanian town of Arusha for the past two years.

"The rebels only have enough force to destroy civilian targets, but they do not have the force to seize the capital," Twagiramungu said. "They do not support the peace process. They want to maintain psychological pressure on the capital by scaring the population and causing them to flee."

Most of those who fled Gasenyi and Kamenge had returned home by noon Friday.

Mandela has been pressuring the rebels to join the peace process, and the presidents of neighboring countries have given them until Oct. 20 to sign a cease-fire or face sanctions. But the newspaper report said the rebels have demanded that the entire agreement be renegotiated.

Bolivia continued.

military barracks in the region — a key demand of the farmers.

The Bolivian government has destroyed 95 percent of the coca fields that provided the leaf for the cocaine industry. Rural public school teachers reached an agreement with the government Sunday night and will return to work once roadblocks are lifted. They agreed to receive 1,200 bolivianos (191 US dollars) per year if they pass proficiency exams. Initial demands for a 50 percent wage hike were rejected.

Rural school teachers will also

receive a 300 boliviano (48 US dollars) bonus if they complete 200 days of classes this year. Urban school teachers have still not reached an agreement with the government and began a fourth week of strikes and protests. The roadblocks and protests are the worst in this country of eight million since democracy returned in 1982 and have caused over dls 100 million in losses to South America's poorest economy.

The negotiations began Friday, a day after President Hugo Banzer said the unrest plaguing Bolivia is a conspiracy organized by cocaine traffickers to destabilize the country.

Extinction risk grows across the globe

LONDON (AP) - A wild cat that roams the Iberian Peninsula, a dolphin off the New Zealand coast, a caviar-producing sturgeon and a red-flowered shrub clinging to the mountains of Mauritius _ all are teetering on the edge of extinction.

Some 11,046 plants and animals risk disappearing forever, according to the most comprehensive analysis of global conservation ever undertaken, the World Conservation Union's 2000 Red List of Threatened Species. The report, released Thursday, examined some 18,000 species and subspecies around the globe.

But scientists acknowledge that even a study of this magnitude only scratches the surface. Earth is home to an estimated 14 million species _ and only 1.75 million have been documented. Many may become extinct before they are even identified, much less assessed by scientists.

"Global society would be horrified if someone set fire to the Louvre in Paris or the Metropolitan Museum in New York, or if someone blew up the Pyramids or the Taj Mahal," said Russell Mittermeier, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Conservation International.

"Yet every time a forest is burned to the ground in Madagascar or the Philippines, the loss to global society is at least as great, yet no one pays very much attention - and sadly it

happens every day."

Conservationists estimate that the current extinction rate is 1,000 to 10,000 times higher than it should be under natural conditions. That means that in the first decades of the 21st century, many creatures - from a majestic Albatross to Asian freshwater turtles _ may join the ranks of the flightless Dodo bird.

The cause: humans. Everything from expanding cities to deforestation, agriculture and fishing pose a significant threat to world biodiversity. In the last 500 years, some 816 species have disappeared - some permanently, while others exist only in artificial settings, like zoos. With 11,046 at significant risk of being confined to the history books, and 4,595 on the brink of being declared threatened, conservationists are gloomy.

"The extinction crisis that we've all been talking about for a long time looks as if it is fast becoming a reality," said Craig Hilton-Taylor, of the World Conservation Union's British branch. "And it is a far more serious problem than ever anticipated."

Since the last assessment, carried out in 1996, the number of mammals identified as critically endangered _ those closest to extinction _ increased from 169 to 180. The number of birds rose from 168 to 182. According to the 2000 Red List, one in every four mammals and one in every eight birds

is at risk. Statistics for plants are more difficult to assess because so many are yet to be analyzed. But conifers, the most studied group, suggest a depressing trend _ some 16 percent are at risk, according to the report.

"This time we were scared by our own results," Maritta Koch-Weser, director-general of the World Conservation Union, said in an interview from her office outside Geneva. "Our world is a result of evolution over 3.5 billion years and we are able in just four years to do away with so much. The magnitude of what we've done is philosophically hard to understand."

The Red List is produced by the World Conservation Union's Species Survival Commission, a network of some 7,000 species experts working in almost every country in the world. The conservationists assign each species to one of eight categories, depending on such factors as the rate of decline, population numbers and the size of the geographic area where it is found.

Species facing a significant threat of extinction are classified as critically endangered, endangered or vulnerable. Examples range from the Iberian lynx, of which only 600 remain, to the Brazilian Guitar Fish, whose numbers declined by 96% due to overfishing.

Hector's dolphins, found only in New Zealand waters, are threatened

by man-made chemicals and gill nets. Sturgeon poaching has escalated since the break-up of the Soviet Union, and of the more than 20 species of the fish, only two are unthreatened.

Indonesia, India, Brazil and China are among the countries with the most threatened mammals and birds, according to the 2000 report. The United States fell out of the top 20 list, replaced this time by *Cameroon* and Russia.

However, the United States did rank top of the chart for the most threatened species of fish and invertebrates, though the figure is slightly misleading as their status has been more closely analyzed in the United States than elsewhere. Malaysia, which has lost a significant proportion of its tropical timber trees tops the list for endangered plant species.

Conservationists said the latest report can be used to educate governments and people worldwide. Ultimately, they are seeking more legal protection for at-risk animals and habitats, the creation of conservation "hot spots" to protect areas facing grave danger and a massive increase in spending above the estimated \$6 billion currently spent worldwide.

"As a society we don't care what are we going to leave behind for people that come after us," said Koch-Weser. "In many cases, we don't even know what we are losing."



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