



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on August 9, 2012

## Saudi Arabia Deports 35 Ethiopian Christians It Detained

Saudi Arabia has deported 35 Ethiopian Christians it had held in detention since December when they were arrested for holding a prayer meeting in a private home. [International Christian Concern](#) (ICC), an organization that monitors the persecution of Christians around the world, reported that the last of the Ethiopians, some of whom had lived and worked in Saudi Arabia for over 15 years, were deported on August 1.



“We have arrived home safe,” one of the released Christians told ICC. “We believe that we are released as the result of the pressure exerted by ICC and others. The Saudi officials don’t tolerate any other religions other than Islam. They consider non-Muslims as unbelievers. They are full of hatred towards non-Muslims.”

According to the ICC, on December 15 Saudi police raided the home where the 29 women and six men were holding an all-night prayer vigil, harassing the participants and originally charging them with breaking a Saudi law barring men and women from meeting together in the same room. A Saudi church leader, however, told ICC that the charge was merely an excuse to intimidate and detain the Christians for practicing their faith. “The Saudi officials are accusing the Christians of committing the crime of mixing of sexes,” the church leader said at the time of the arrests, “because if they charge them with meeting for practicing Christianity, they will come under pressure from the international human rights organizations as well as Western countries. In fact, when an employer of one of the detainees asked the reason for their employee’s arrest, the Saudi official told him that it was for practicing Christianity.” According to ICC, during the nearly eight months the Ethiopian Christians were held, their Saudi captors assaulted and harassed them in an attempt to coerce them into converting to Islam. The detainees told ICC that the intimidation included strip-searching the women and physically abusing the men. One of the female Christians said that in February a Muslim preacher came to their cells in an effort to persuade them to leave the Christian faith. “The Muslim preacher vilified Christianity, denigrated the Bible and told us that Islam is the only true religion,” the woman told ICC in a phone interview. “The preacher told us to convert to Islam.” She added that “when the preacher asked us, we didn’t deny ... our Christian faith.”

In June [ICC reported](#) that when pressured by several U.S. congressional offices investigating the incident, Saudi officials changed their stories several times on just why the Ethiopian Christians were being detained. According to the ICC report, in early May a source close to the Saudi ambassador to the U.S. “had indicated the Christians were arrested as part of an investigation into a large scale human smuggling ring.” However, that explanation conflicted with the explanation offered in January to [Human Rights Watch](#) that the Christian group had been charged with “illicit mingling of genders.” Shortly thereafter, Saudi officials changed their story, with a representative from the Saudi embassy telling one congressional staffer that the Christians had been detained over problems with their work permits. But when ICC provided a list of the prisoners and their legal work permit numbers to the congressional office, the Saudi representative once again changed the explanation and claimed the Christians were involved in drug smuggling and human trafficking.



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Finally, reported ICC, “on May 21st, in a meeting with staff members from multiple congressional offices, representatives from the Saudi government said that the 35 Christians had been arrested for visa issues, but that they were also involved in some form of smuggling ring. When pressed for specifics, the Saudi officials reportedly demurred and changed the topic.”

One of the prisoners told ICC that the Christians were “very sad, and very surprised” at the dubious allegations leveled by the Saudi government. “Why haven’t they brought us to court?” the spokesman for the detained Christians asked. “Why don’t they show us some evidence and bring charges against us? [We feel like] the Saudis are trying to punish us for being Christians by keeping us in prison.”

Saudi Arabia has long maintained close diplomatic ties with the U.S., even as it is considered one of the world’s worst repressors of religious freedom. The country bars all public expression of religious conviction other than the strictest interpretation of Islam, and the U.S. State Department has designated the country a “country of particular concern” because of its poor record of human rights abuses, particularly in the realm of religious freedom.

While the Saudi government claims to allow non-Muslim worship in private homes, the experience of the Ethiopian Christians demonstrates otherwise. Following their release, ICC spokesman Jonathan Racho charged that the arrest, detention, and deportation of the Christian believers demonstrate the “utter disregard” officials in Saudi Arabia have for religious freedom in their country. “The Saudis deceive the international community by pretending to promote tolerance among followers of different religious beliefs,” he said. “However, in reality they don’t tolerate any other religion besides Wahhabi Islam. The international community must pressure Saudi Arabia to respect religious freedom.”

According to [BosNewsLife.com](#), a Europe-based news site, earlier this year Saudi authorities deported two members of a Pentecostal house church in the Saudi city of Riyadh. The two Indian Christians, part of a house congregation called Rejoice in the Church of the Lord, had been held since January 2011 after they were arrested while organizing a Bible study group in one of the apartments where their approximately 70-member congregation met. The news site added that “scores of other Christians are known to have been detained and deported in recent years” in the country.

Meanwhile, an Iranian Christian website reported that a 28-year-old Saudi Arabian woman made news recently when she publicly announced in a video that she had converted from Islam to Christianity. According to [Mohabat News](#), in the short video the woman identified as Maryam announced that “I have quit the darkness of Wahhabi Islam and entered the light of Christianity. I dreamt that I needed to do this. Jesus Christ came to visit me in my dream and gave me the name of Maryam” — which is Arabic for Mary. The young lady added that “the morality police’s treatment caused me to not take fasting and prayer seriously and to eventually convert to Christianity.”

*Photo: [Saudi Embassy](#) in Washington, D.C.*



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