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Washington, D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today called for the immediate release of 35 Ethiopian Christians who have been detained by Saudi Arabian police since December 15, allegedly for participating in a private religious gathering.

“The Saudi government immediately should release all 35 Christians who have been detained without charge. Unless and until the Saudi government demonstrates some valid legal basis for imprisoning these individuals, they should immediately be set free and Saudi authorities should investigate allegations of physical abuse and degrading treatment by prison officials,” said USCIRF Chair [Leonard Leo](#) .

On December 15, Saudi authorities raided a private religious gathering in Jeddah and detained the 35 Ethiopian Christian expatriate workers, 29 women and six men. Some of the men detained have alleged that they were physically abused during interrogations and the female detainees reportedly were subjected to intrusive and humiliating body cavity searches. While no formal charges have been made, the detainees reportedly were charged with “illicit mingling” with the opposite sex. Saudi authorities informed sponsors of some of the detainees that their employees were being held because of illegal religious activities. The detainees also reportedly face imminent deportation.

“In recent years, the number of arrests and deportations by Saudi authorities of non-Muslim expatriate workers for engaging in private religious worship had decreased significantly. This new development raises serious concern about a possible regression towards past practices,” said Leo. “In addition, the Saudi government continues to hold other prisoners on the basis of religion or belief, including Hadi Al-Mutif, an Ismaili Muslim, who, having been jailed for apostasy since 1994, is one of the longest serving religious prisoners in the world.” Furthermore, there have been reports that a Filipino Christian expatriate worker was arrested and charged with blasphemy by Saudi authorities in October, although his current whereabouts are unknown.

Since 2004, the U.S. Department of State has designated Saudi Arabia a “country of particular concern” for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. The Saudi government persists in banning all forms of public religious expression other than the government’s own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam and prohibits any non-Muslim places of worship. Despite King Abdullah undertaking some limited reform measures and promoting inter-religious dialogue in international fora in recent years, little progress has been made more than five years after the State Department publicly announced that, as a result of bilateral discussions, the Saudi government had confirmed that it would advance specific policies with the aim of improving religious freedom conditions.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

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