



Saudi Arabia's human rights conference

BY BRIAN CLOUGHLEY

There are times when a truly surreal announcement rocks the mind out of its benevolent complacency and sets the little grey cells whirling in disbelief. When a politician makes a particularly ludicrous pronouncement ("I am not a crook!"; "I did not have sexual relations with that woman"; "We come to Iraq with respect for its citizens" - that beauty was Bush on March 20) the average thinking person merely shrugs an unbelieving shoulder and is mildly surprised that the speaker wasn't immediately incinerated by one of the Almighty's more deadly thunderbolts. But when the headline is "Kingdom to Host World Conference on Human Rights" and it transpires that the kingdom is Saudi Arabia, there is not just a mental double-take but an almost uncontrollable desire to scream with incredulity and derision.

The first question is whether Amnesty International will be permitted to attend the wonderful human rights gathering due to take place in Riyadh in October. If it is invited, the move would mark an astonishing change of heart in the world's most rigid theocracy (even including Iran). Amnesty has asked repeatedly for permission to visit Saudi Arabia and has never received a response, so it will be interesting to see what happens. The Saudi Red Crescent Society announced that invitations to the "World Conference" had been issued to "a number of universities, the Shoura Council, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, the King Faisal Foundation, the International Red Cross Society, the Muslim World League, the Italy-based International Institute for Human Rights, and some UN organisations", which seems fairly impressive on the surface.



Five star luxury Al Faisaliah Hotel, Banquet and Conference Centre, and 100 designer appointed luxury apartments." Embrace self-sufficiency and abandon human rights all ye who enter there.

We'll pass over the Muslim World League (proprietor and bankroller, Saudi Arabia) which never says anything about human rights (surprise, surprise), and go on to the Italy-based International Institute for Human Rights. Aha!, I thought: now we're talking. This is obviously an outfit dedicated to human rights (it's pretty sharp, sometimes), and no doubt works hard in that cause, although it's a bit peculiar I've never heard of it before. But the real title of this outfit is the International Institute for Human Rights' STUDIES, which is not exactly the name one would give to an energetically investigative organisation that is determined to publicise and attempt to correct violations of human rights around the world. It is simply a well-funded (from where?) academic think-tank, whose latest achievement has been to "plan a study for the convention of minorities which was approved by the Council of Europe". What cutting-edge stuff, to be sure. Rest easy, Aung San Suu Kyi, because the International Institute for Human Rights' Studies may get round to writing a paper on your plight in about 2007.

There is one thing certain about this conference of the docile and dumb in October: it will not examine or even comment on the state of human rights in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. And little wonder. Even Washington has to admit that the Saudi "human rights record" remained poor last year. The State Department's "Country Report" is an honest document (as one would expect from a US government body that isn't run by Rumsfeld or Ashcroft), and records the many flagrant violations of human decency by Riyadh's plutocratic autocracy and its blinkered, theocratic, henchmen.

This I remind you is the country

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But let's look at these institutions. The International Red Cross is wonderful, but the reason it has been asked to Riyadh is that it never comments publicly about anything. In spite of its assiduous representations to countries guilty of the most atrocious abuses of human rights, it is not a world player in influencing governments. (It hasn't managed to get the US to adhere to the Geneva Conventions concerning illegal imprisonment of over 600 people in the concentration camp at Guantanamo Bay.) Next, the 'Shoura Council' of Saudi Arabia which has 60 members, all appointed directly by the king. The Saudi government states that "The Al Shoura Council enjoys the same powers as western parliaments; it is entitled to enact laws, oversee the functions of governmental agencies and investigate public cases. Saudi Arabia has thus adopted a form of democracy free of drawbacks." (Please stop laughing. You have to understand that 'democracy' means theocracy and 'drawbacks' means democracy. So stop giggling, I beg. Kindly wipe away your tears of mirth and pay attention.)

This, I remind you, is the country so valued by Bush that he invited one of the sentient members of the royal family to his ranch in April of last year, when he declared: "The Crown Prince and I had a very cordial meeting that confirmed the strong relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States of America. Our partnership is important to both our nations. And it is important to the cause of peace and stability in the Middle East and the world... It is a strong and important friendship." At the time that Bush was saying thrice that Saudi is important to America, the State Department was compiling evidence that in the country of the cordial Crown Prince "torture and abuse were used to obtain confessions from prisoners", while "punishments included flogging, amputation, and execution by stoning, beheading or firing squad", and "women have few political or social rights and are not treated as equal members of society."

The 14,000 words of the US report on human rights in Saudi Arabia are a damning indictment of the government and community structure of the

and pay attention.

The 57 countries of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) couldn't agree on the time of day and spend vast sums of money jetting to meetings all over the world to continue the disagreement process in five star hotel suites. In fact I'm wrong, there, because they actually can agree on one thing: human rights are for the birds. The last meeting of OIC foreign ministers was held in Tehran in May and was opened by His Excellency Seyed Mohammad Khatami, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a prominent world figure whose deep concern for human rights caused him to arrest 4000 people during recent demonstrations and whose theocratic Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is an unbalanced blinkered zealot who could well claim ideological kinship with Rumsfeld or Cheney.

Then there is attendance by the King Faisal Foundation which "dedicates itself to making a positive difference to humanity and improving the human condition by providing assistance and promoting self-sufficiency within less fortunate communities, furthering education through its schools..." It does this by erecting grandiose buildings in Riyadh, such as the "showcase project". It describes *this positive difference* to humanity as "a 267-metre office tower, which includes 30 floors of office space topped by a glittering golden globe and an elegant two-storey residential lounge." It improves the human condition by including "a 5-storey building featuring the world's largest glass window" and a conditioned link to the 224-room

[theocratic] society. I don't think many of us have even an inkling of just how terrible life is in that culturally medieval country in which women are treated as chattels and there is no regard for the sanctity of human life. The State Department notes that "The government prohibits or restricts freedom of speech, the press, assembly, association, religion and movement", and it can be truthfully said that Hitler, Stalin and Mao didn't trample on human rights more effectively than the royals and mullahs of Saudi Arabia. Yet Bush insists on "a strong relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States of America" and values the "strong and important friendship".

It all stinks, but one of the biggest stench is from the Oval Office whose incumbent lacks the moral courage to criticize what the Saudis call, absurdly, "a form of democracy free of drawbacks". The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a brutal, feudal autocracy that regards the world with contempt. All women, and those male citizens not privileged by membership of the extended royal family, have no rights whatever. With the pretexts of piety and adherence to religious tenets the country's self-anointed leaders rule tyrannically without fear of correction or even meaningful criticism. These humbugs have set the seal on their hypocrisy by announcing this Potemkin conference on human rights which is intended to convince the world that the Kingdom Cares. So who's going to be fooled? Perhaps not even the king and his dissipated family.

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