

Naif calls for study on providing citizenship to undocumented Saudis

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Interior Minister Prince Naif has urged officials of his ministry and the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) to conduct a study on providing citizenship to undocumented Saudis.

He made this announcement during a meeting with Dr. Bandar Al-Hajjar, president of NSHR, at his office in Riyadh recently.

Saudi Arabia applies strict rules in granting citizenship to other nationals. However, a number of applicants, who were competent and specialized in scientific subjects, was given Saudi citizenship last year.

The Interior Ministry's Agency for Civil Affairs in Riyadh began accepting citizenship applications on May 23, 2005. Priority was given to applicants holding doctorates in medicine, engineering and other sciences.

Applicants must accumulate a minimum of 23 points to qualify in the first stage of the process. An applicant will receive 10 points for a 10-year continuous stay, 13 points for specializations required by the country (13 points for those who have doctorates in medicine or engineering, 10 points for those holding doctorates in other sciences and eight points for master's degrees) and 10 points for family relations.

Many of the Kingdom's seven million expatriate workers, including a large number of Arabs and Asians, applied for citizenship after the Cabinet approved the newly amended Naturalization Law.

The new move to provide citizenship to undocumented Saudis will help a large number of people in the Kingdom and put an end to their long suffering. Take Bahauddin, 29, son of a Saudi father and Egyptian mother, for instance.

Bahauddin, who holds neither Saudi nor Egyptian citizenship, has urged Saudi authorities to grant him citizenship and officially recognize his status. His father, Abdullah, married his mother unofficially only to divorce her and return to the Kingdom five months after Bahauddin's birth. His mother had to pay for his education in state schools of Egypt because he was not an Egyptian.

The Cabinet changed Article 16 of the Citizenship Law last year, allowing the interior minister to grant Saudi citizenship to a foreign woman married to a Saudi or the foreign widow of a Saudi if she applies for it and relinquishes her original citizenship.

"The new system allows a divorced non-Saudi woman to apply for citizenship, especially if she has been married for a long time and has a child from her Saudi husband," said Omar Al-Khouli, a lawyer.

"Saudi citizenship can only be canceled if the woman obtains another citizenship and not because she got divorced," he added. Al-Khouli said that international human rights laws prohibit a country from making a person a non-citizen of any country.

During his meeting with Prince Naif, Al-Hajjar raised a number of important issues related to human rights including the situation of Saudi women married to foreigners and the treatment of their children and husbands.

Prince Naif favored a proposal made by NSHR officials that travel bans be restricted to cases specifically mentioned by the law or ordered by the court. “Our ministry is also seeking the same,” the NSHR quoted Naif as saying.

The need for transferring prisoners held for security reasons to court for trial as well as poor hygienic conditions in some prisons and the delay in renewing iqamas (resident permits) of guest workers as a result of disputes with their employers were also discussed.

Prince Naif blamed the Justice Ministry for the delay in investigating the cases of some prisoners.