

Saudi rights activists seek recognition

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A group of Saudi activists urged the government on Tuesday to okay a human rights society they set up four years ago by enacting a relevant law and to free two detained founders of their association.

In a statement received by AFP, the six activists, including two women, said they had formed a committee to follow up the application for a licence for the rights watchdog that was first presented to authorities in January 2003.

"We urge the Shura Council to accelerate the approval of the law on civil societies and institutions, which should clearly guarantee freedom of action for civil society groups," the statement said.

Such groups, including human rights watchdogs, should be allowed to operate "outside the control of government institutions," the statement said.

It noted that the Shura Council, an advisory body appointed by the king, has been looking into the draft legislation that would allow their group to be recognised for more than a year.

The signatories also demanded the release of two fellow founders of the group and seven other activists who have been detained since early February without trial.

Authorities have linked the arrest of the nine, who advocate an Islam-based constitutional monarchy, to alleged involvement in terror funding. But appeals for their release have recently multiplied, with 135 activists petitioning King Abdullah to intervene on their behalf.

Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy with no elected parliament or political parties, has allowed two human rights groups since 2004, including one affiliated with the government.