

EIR Investigation

Does chattel slavery exist in Kuwait or Saudi Arabia?

Call for an Emergency Investigation
by the U.S. Congress

What follows is most of the introductory part of a lengthy documentary dossier presented to the U.S. Congress for investigation. It was introduced to the press by Webster Tarpley at a conference called by EIR in Washington, D.C. on Nov. 15, 1990:

According to the United Nations Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery (promulgated in 1956), a chattel slave is defined as a person "over whom any or all of the rights of ownership are exercised." A slave may also be thought of as a person who is owned and who thus has neither freedom nor human rights, or one who, when working for another person, is not free to withhold his or her labor. Chattel slavery may thus be distinguished in current usage from such related forms of servitude as debt bondage, serfdom, the exploitation of women and children, and servile forms of marriage.

As a result of the current international attention centering on Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and other countries situated in the region of the Persian Gulf, the question of the existence in these countries of chattel slavery involving persons of black, brown, yellow, and white skin has arisen. This report is a first attempt to assemble excerpts from relevant documentation that may help U.S. public opinion, and in particular elected representatives of the United States Congress, to build an increasing awareness of the slavery issue as it regards Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf. Our findings indicate that the institution of chattel slavery, preying especially al-

though by no means exclusively on black African victim populations, was an undeniable fact of life in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf states through the 1960s and into the 1970s. We have also unearthed tangible evidence that points to the existence of chattel slavery, especially in the form of slaves held by the families of the royal houses and the ruling elite, down to the present day.

Congress must get the truth

We feel that the evidence we have been able to assemble makes it impossible to ignore the question of chattel slavery on the part of Jaber el Sabah, the deposed Emir of Kuwait, since the Bush administration has announced that the restoration of Emir Jaber to his throne is one of the non-negotiable goals of United States foreign policy in this region, for which the Bush administration has repeatedly announced its willingness to risk war. American citizens of all races and colors who are thus being asked to fight and perhaps die for the restoration of the Emir of Kuwait and for the rest of the Kuwaiti royal family have an undeniable right to a clear answer on the question of whether or not the Emir is a slaveholder. The same applies to the Saudi royal family, which United States forces are now deployed to defend. Since the Congress may shortly be called upon to declare war against Iraq over the issue of Kuwait, it is the duty of the Congress to get the truth on these questions, proceeding on an emergency basis. This report accordingly certainly does not contain the last word on the slavery issue as regards the Gulf. But it does, in our view, provide sufficient material to motivate the investigation we are calling for, in which the subpoena power

of Congress can be employed to compel testimony on the salient facts involved.

Since administration spokesmen have stated that U.S. forces in the Gulf have a mission of protecting freedom, and since President Bush has welcomed the Emir of Kuwait to the White House, the oversight role of Congress in the conduct of foreign policy must include the verification of these statements in the light of relevant facts, including the facts on slavery. If this country were to commit itself to fighting a war for the restoration of a form of government in Kuwait which were later found to include the restoration or continuation of chattel slavery, the moral integrity of this nation would suffer damage from which it would be difficult ever to recover. In addition, institutions that support slavery that exist in an area in which United States forces are operating poses a quantifiable danger to members of our Armed Forces who may, especially under the strained conditions of warfare or acute international tensions, become the victims of such slave institutions. It is the duty of Congress to determine the magnitude of this threat and recommend appropriate counter-measures in a timely fashion.

Before proceeding with the substance of our argument, a prefatory note may facilitate comprehension. Published sources indicate that during most of this century, a slave trade has existed with its center in the Arabian peninsula, where such countries as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are situated. Slaves were drawn from West Africa, from North Africa, from East Africa, from the horn of Africa, from such Indian Ocean islands as Madagascar and Zanzibar, from Iran, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Thailand, the Philippines, and other regions, to be sold to end users located in the Arabian peninsula. In this sense, the Arabian peninsula may be said to be the center of the trade in chattel slaves during the 20th century, and the principal destination for slaves in international smuggling. Published sources, including the relevant United Nations reports cited below and in the appendix, make it clear that this trade was flourishing until quite recently. It is also clear that although proclamations purporting to terminate the importation and holding of chattel slaves have been promulgated at various times by Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the other governments involved, the efficacy of these measures in reducing or eliminating the slave trade and above all the persistence of slave-holding is open to very serious question.

Recent history

While the evidence of the past 20 years is not systematic, and relies heavily on reports from journalists, travelers, and other eyewitnesses, there are enough well-documented reports to strongly suggest that slavery persists and may in fact be in resurgence, especially in the upper strata of society. As for the persistence of the institution, we must recall that it is deeply rooted in centuries of history, and that we are dealing with a part of the world which has proven strongly resistant

to basic social change.

As for the possible resurgence of slavery, we will do well to pay careful attention to the authors cited below who point out that one of the reasons that slavery has been able to survive is because of the great and desperate poverty of the areas from which the slaves are traditionally drawn, compared with the relatively greater wealth of the potentates of Arabia who are the end users of the slaves. Over the past 20 years, we must recall that the chronic famines of the Sahel region, the Sudan, Ethiopia, and other parts of Africa have generated perhaps the most acute poverty and starvation that these regions have ever known. In addition, civil wars have been going on for all or part of this time in countries like the Sudan, Ethiopia, and others which are high on the list of traditional sources of slaves destined for Arabia and the Gulf.

By contrast, during the 1970s and 1980s, the relative wealth, especially the wealth concentrated in the hands of the ruling elites of countries like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, has increased astronomically. Famine and starvation where the slaves originate, plus unprecedented monetary wealth on the part of prospective slave-owners in Arabia, are a combination that bodes ill for any serious attempt to abolish slavery, even assuming that sincere attempts in this direction were ongoing.

The Greer report

Germaine Greer, the well-known author, contributed the article excerpted here to the London *Independent* magazine of Oct. 13, 1990. The article is entitled: "Germaine Greer on the Slave-Owners of Kuwait." This provides an introduction to present-day indications of slavery and slave-like practices on the part of the Kuwaiti and Gulf elite:

"Who are our new friends, the Kuwaitis, for whose national sovereignty we are prepared to die? Who is the beaming Emir who has been given a standing ovation at the United Nations despite the fact that since 1986, when he dissolved the Kuwaiti National Assembly, he has ruled by personal decree? For one thing he is the kinsman of Sheika Faria el Sabah and Sheika Samiya, who stole their servant's passport and her two gold teeth, kept her a prisoner in their Bayswater apartment for four years, and gave her no bed but the floor outside the locked kitchen door, and very little sleep in any case, very little food and no wages but daily whippings that have left her scarred for life. The High Court awarded the Kuwaiti princesses' slave £300,000 damages last December, but who remembers?

"It is only because Laximi Swami's spirit was unbroken after years of brutalization that her case ever came to light. The Home Office makes it easy for Gulf Arabs to import slavery by issuing their servants visitors' visas and denying them the right to work for any other employer. Officially nobody knows how many Laximis are prisoners in the houses of Hampstead and Kensington, and nobody except the Anti-Slavery Society cares.

"For all the necessities of everyday life the Gulf Arabs rely on foreign labour. In all the great airports between Manila and the Gulf you can see gangs of men and women, many with numbers on the breasts, lying or sitting on their cardboard suitcases, gazing about them with anxious, uncomprehending eyes or sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. Many of them have sold their land or incurred debts to pay for their passage to the Gulf. When they arrive, their passports are taken away; they sign documents in Arabic, which they neither speak nor read, and find themselves bound to hard labor for years. Those who refuse to sign on are told that they must leave at once and pay their own fares home. Some who think that they are going to exercise the professions for which they are qualified find themselves scrubbing floors for half the pay they were promised.

"Foreign workers in the Gulf have no rights and no representation. Their fate is entirely in the hands of the employer and his family. Children are taught to discipline—that is, to insult, pinch, slap, and pull the hair of—servants who displease them. Many servants have to carry buzzers so that they are on call at all hours of the 24. They are not allowed to do their own shopping or cooking, and eat only what is left after their employers and their guests have been fed. There is often no time off even for religious observance.

"Now and then the *Kuwait Times* reported spectacular cases of servants thrown from roof-tops, burnt, or blinded or battered to death; the systematic abuse they endured every day was unworthy of remark. Occasionally, desperate servants ran away, but with no money, no documents and no command of Arabic they had nowhere to go except to the police, and the police would promptly return them to their employers. . . ."

Sawyer's evidence

The case which Germaine Greer is referring to is one that has attracted some attention in London over the past few years. It is also mentioned in Roger Sawyer's recent study, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), pp. 13-14. Sawyer writes as follows in his chapter on Chattel Slavery:

"That slavery continues to exist in households within and without the Arabian peninsula is periodically observed by Western visitors and, more dramatically, is demonstrated by evidence of slaves brought with diplomatic missions to London, Geneva, and elsewhere. Occasionally it may even be found in England in non-diplomatic households which lack the protection of the Vienna Convention in Diplomatic Relations:

"On 16 April 1984 in Marylebone Magistrates Court I heard the evidence for the prosecution in a case in which two Kuwaiti sheikhas were accused by their Indian and Sri Lankan servants of having taken their passports, forbidden them to leave the house, fed them irregularly and insufficiently, worked them very long hours, paid them nothing and

beaten them both almost daily with a whip or with a length of electric flex.

"Perhaps the most objectionable aspect of this abuse, apart from the fate of ex-slaves in general, is the vulnerability of women in slavery-oriented society and the plight of the most defenseless section of the community, the children of the slave class."

Does Kuwait's ambassador have slaves?

These citations suggest that slavery or at least slave-like practices may be present among the current Kuwaiti elite to the degree that Kuwaiti diplomats, using the cover of their privileged status, journey to other countries or even live there with servants who are in fact chattel slaves. The Congress has a right to know if the Emir of Kuwait, in his current exile in Saudi Arabia, is accompanied by slaves, and if it is intended that these slaves should accompany the Emir back to Kuwait if he is restored. There is also the question of whether the Kuwaiti ambassador to the United States also retains slaves in his personal entourage, what is the national origin and citizenship of such slaves, whether the U.S. Department of State is aware of whether or not he does, and if the keeping of slaves in this way would be covered by international conventions governing the rights and privileges of diplomatic personnel. Have any slaves requested asylum in the United States, and have they been granted or denied such asylum? The Congress, in short, must determine if Kuwaiti representatives have in effect imported chattel slavery back into this country.

The related issue of so-called "white slavery," properly defined as international trafficking in women captives for purpose of sexual exploitation as this regards Kuwait, is pointed out by a study recently issued by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, written by Sara M. Averick, and entitled *A Human Rights Comparison: Israel versus the Arab States* (Washington, D.C.: AIPAC, 1988), p. 12. Averick cites a 1974 Interpol report on traffic in women, which states that "There is a European regional 'market,' mainly in French women who 'work' in neighboring countries, mostly in Luxembourg and the Federal Republic of Germany (in 'Eros Centers'), but women from South America and other countries are sometimes involved. There are links between this 'market' and other regions, notably the Middle East. . . . The situation would appear to be the same in Kuwait."

According to unconfirmed reports in certain Arab press organs, the Emir of Kuwait is rumored to have married a number of women numbering in the hundreds, and to have divorced a large proportion of these wives. It is not impossible that the white slavery trafficking referred to may have involved the Emir's palace itself. The possibility that American citizens may have been drawn into the kind of trafficking described by Interpol must put this issue high on the agenda of the required congressional investigations.

Current evidence also points to the continued phenome-

non of chattel slavery in Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, as well as Kuwait. The following is a dispatch from EIR News Service:

“WASHINGTON, D.C., Oct. 28 (EIRNS)—According to a highly reliable Middle East source, black chattel slaves are held today at the palaces of the ruling families of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and other Gulf states. The black slaves are kept as servants, waiters, butlers, maids, footmen, and above all as concubines and odalisques for the Gulf rulers, and are usually quartered in special slave compounds attached to palaces and luxury villas in the region.

“These black slaves often have a very limited knowledge of Arabic, but instead speak the languages of Ethiopia and other African countries from which they or their ancestors were kidnaped or bought and imported in a slave trade that went on openly until some 30-40 years ago. Now the slave import trade has declined, but the offspring born to slaves in the slave quarters are themselves slaves and continue to serve their Gulf masters, according to the source, who was personally served coffee by a black slave of Ethiopian origin at a reception held in the Emir of Bahrain’s divan or court hall.

“The existence of these slaves is an open secret in the region, even though such slavery is officially denied by the area’s regimes. It is quite common, for example, for groups of black slaves to visit merchants, souks, and bazaars to do the shopping for the households they serve. Merchants give them priority service as a sign of respect for the prince or potentate who owns the slaves. Although the Koran allows orthodox Muslims a maximum of four wives, the Saudi Wahabite royal family and their counterparts in the rest of the Gulf interpret another clause of the Koran as meaning that unlimited numbers of women who are ‘owned,’ that is to say slaves, can also be exploited as concubines. This allows the existence of large black slave harems controlled by the wealthy rulers. White slavery, or trafficking in white female chattel concubines, which was commonly practiced in the Gulf until recent decades, has declined in favor of the importation of non-chattel prostitutes from Europe and the West, since this is simpler to administer. The Arabic word ‘abd’ signifies both ‘slave’ and ‘black.’

“Large towns in every Gulf state have public squares that were used as slave markets until about the time of World War II, although many of these have been renamed. Oblique references to the continued existence of black slavery in the Gulf are to be found in even the most recent United Nations human rights reports on labor conditions and bondage. . . .”

Eyewitness account

This general view appears to be borne out by the eyewitness account from an American doctor who had been a resident of Saudi Arabia in 1983-85. Because of pervasive censorship and secret police surveillance in Saudi Arabia, it is typical that much of the investigation of the problem of slav-

ery must rely on reports from returning travelers from the area, and that many of these sources must decline to be identified because of the fear of retaliation of some sort by the Saudi government.

Relevant parts of this interview are as follows:

Q. When you were in Saudi Arabia did you see any sign of the existence of slavery?

A. This exists in many Middle Eastern countries. This is their way of life. Families sell their children quite regularly. I have treated patients who were slaves. Many Sudanese and Filipinos.

Q. Where were you working?

A. At the King Faisal Hospital in Riyadh. It was one of the most modern in the whole country. We treated the royal family and the Saudi elite. If you were from Yemen or some other Arab country, you couldn’t get in there. But occasionally I would be brought Filipinos or Sudanese, who were obviously slaves of some elite family. I remember one occasion flying back to Saudi Arabia on Saudia airlines. A Saudi princess came with a child and four or five Sudanese care-takers. They are owned by Saudi families.

Q. Are the Sudanese commonly used as slaves?

A. The Sudanese are definitely used as slaves. They may be treated well. They are probably not whipped or mistreated. But they are not allowed to speak to you. They will deliver coffee and when you thank them they will give you no sign of recognition. At first I thought that was because they didn’t understand what I was saying, but soon I understood that they were not permitted to speak or communicate in any way. They had special quarters in their own villas. It was like the old South. All this is still happening.

Q. Do you have any indication how the slave trade operates now?

A. Many of these people were sold into slavery 20 years ago by their parents. I had a Filipino patient, who couldn’t have been more than 27-28. She had not seen her parents in 20 years. She had obviously been sold by her parents to the Saudis. The trade is more obscure than open. Much of it is conducted through Jeddah on the Red Sea. Slaves are owned by members of the royal family.

Q. Is this true also for countries like Kuwait?

A. It is undoubtedly true for all the monarchies in the Arabian peninsula. Sometimes people come to the country and are not allowed enough money to go home. Children are sold by their parents to foreign owners for profit. The Sudanese were the most characteristic. They were like cats. They wouldn’t say a word. They would just crawl into a corner and not say a word when they had performed their assigned tasks.

Q. Does anyone talk openly about this?

A. It wasn’t too wise to ask too many questions. But other people will tell you about this. The Pakistanis living there will talk about it. And Jeddah seems to be the main trading point for this quiet trade in human lives.