

Argentina considers war crimes investigation of Saudi crown prince

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Authorities in Argentina are considering a war crimes investigation into Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman before his appearance in Buenos Aires for an international summit with world leaders.

Late Monday, Human Rights Watch, a New York-based advocacy group, submitted a complaint to Argentina's federal prosecutor.

It alleges the crown prince violated international law in connection with a Saudi-led military campaign in war-racked Yemen, the Arab world's poorest country. Mohammed could face criminal liability for his role as Saudi defense minister, although Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler would probably be shielded by his diplomatic status.

Ariel Lijo, the federal judge handling the case, could not be reached for comment.

The human rights complaint highlights the crown prince's "possible complicity in serious allegations of torture and other ill-treatment of Saudi citizens," including Jamal Khashoggi, a U.S. resident and columnist for The Washington Post who was killed inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul on Oct. 2 as he tried to collect marriage documents.

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Saudi authorities initially denied any knowledge of Khashoggi's death, then conceded he was killed in an operation aimed at bringing the writer back to the kingdom. They insisted the crown prince was not aware of any such operation, a position that satisfied President Donald Trump despite assessments by U.S. intelligence and other experts who said he must have known about it.

After sanctioning 17 Saudi nationals linked to the killing, Trump said last week he would not take further action, partly because of Saudi oil wealth and its multibillion-dollar purchases of U.S. arms.

Crown Prince Mohammed embarked on his first foreign tour since Khashoggi's killing late last week when he visited Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, a close ally of the 33-year-old Saudi royal. Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, is part of a Saudi-led coalition battling Iran-aligned Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Over the weekend, the crown prince traveled to Bahrain, another country where Riyadh and Tehran have battled for influence. Tuesday, he is expected in Tunisia, where protesters called for his trip to be canceled amid the Khashoggi revelations.

When he attends the Group of 20 summit in Argentina on Friday, Mohammed will come face to face with Trump, as well as European leaders and Turkey's president, in what could be a test of his future status on the world stage.

"It's really going to be about can you travel to the rest of Western capitals for the foreseeable future and expect to sort of shake people's hands," H.A. Hellyer, a scholar at the Atlantic Council, told The Associated Press. "I'm not sure that that's the case."

U.S. senators are likely to vote this week on a measure that would end U.S. military support for the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen. The vote on the War Powers Resolution is likely to take place Wednesday or Thursday.

Human Rights Watch submitted its complaint in Argentina because the country's constitution recognizes universal jurisdiction for war crimes and torture, a legacy of the country's military rule from 1976-1983 when thousands of regime opponents disappeared.

"Judicial authorities in the country are empowered to investigate and prosecute these crimes no matter where they were committed, and regardless of the nationality of the suspects or their victims," the group said in its petition. It noted that Argentina's criminal code "provides that any person can make a submission with judicial authorities in the country if they learn about, or are affected by, the commission of a crime."

It said that since 2015, the Saudi-led coalition has carried out "scores of indiscriminate and disproportionate airstrikes on civilians and civilian objects in Yemen, hitting homes, schools, hospitals, markets and mosques. Many of these attacks – if carried out with criminal intent – indicate possible war crimes. The coalition has also imposed and maintained a naval and air blockade on Yemen that has severely restricted the flow of food, fuel and medicine to civilians. Millions of civilians face hunger and disease."

According to the United Nations, about 14 million people in Yemen face starvation.

Kenneth Roth, Human Rights Watch's executive director, said a decision by Argentine officials to "move toward investigation would be a strong signal that even powerful officials like Mohammed bin Salman are not beyond the reach of the law."

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