Saudi Arabia expels Canadian envoy after criticism of activist arrests

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By Summer Said

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Saudi Arabia said it has expelled Canada’s ambassador in the kingdom and recalled its own envoy from the North American country after the government in Ottawa expressed concern over recent arrests of civil-society and women’s rights activists in the kingdom.

Saudi Arabia’s foreign ministry early Monday said the kingdom was also freezing all new business and investment transactions with Canada while retaining its right to take further action.

"The Ministry also affirmed that the Canadian position is an explicit and transparent interference in the internal affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," the ministry said.

Saudi Arabia said it considers the Canadian ambassador in Saudi Arabia as persona non grata and gave him a 24-hour notice to leave the kingdom.

Representatives for Canada’s foreign department didn’t respond to a request for comment.

Last week, authorities in Saudi Arabia detained two women’s rights activists, broadening a campaign of arrests that has drawn international criticism and tainted the kingdom’s top-down agenda of change.

Those rounded up in recent days include Samar Badawi, who is known for having challenged the kingdom’s male guardianship rules and is the sister of one of Saudi Arabia’s most prominent detainees, liberal blogger Raif Badawi. Ms. Badawi is one of at least 18 civil-rights activists arrested since May, four of whom have been temporarily released, activists say. Many others are banned from traveling outside the kingdom. None of them is known to have been formally charged.

The Saudi move on Monday came after the Canadian embassy in Riyadh said Canada was “gravely concerned” over a new wave of arrests of human-rights campaigners in the kingdom, including Ms. Badawi.

“We urge the Saudi authorities to immediately release them and all other peaceful #humanrights activists,” the embassy tweeted on Friday.