



**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
U.S. Congress**

**Hearing:
“Implementation of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry Report”
August 01, 2012**

Statement by Amnesty International USA

Amnesty International USA welcomes this opportunity to address the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on the important subject of human rights in Bahrain. We believe that the U.S. Congress has a crucial role to play in supporting human rights and accountability for the people of Bahrain.

Amnesty International’s vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other internationally recognized human rights standards. For more than 50 years, Amnesty International has been helping to build a world where human rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled.

Today in Bahrain, repression of freedom of expression is continuing with impunity. Despite government promises to introduce reforms following its violent crackdown on protesters in 2011, few improvements have been seen on the ground.

The Government of Bahrain is refusing to release scores of prisoners who are incarcerated simply because they exercised their rights to freedom of expression and association. Indeed, Bahrain’s government has sentenced and imprisoned a number of nonviolent critics and activists, making them prisoners of conscience.

In her testimony to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, Bahrain’s Ambassador to the United States Houda Ezra Ebrahim Nonoo stated, “All charges against protestors relating to freedom of speech have been dropped.” Unfortunately, the Government of Bahrain continues to use criminal charges to persecute individuals exercising their right to freedom of expression. Bahraini authorities have charged, convicted, and imprisoned peaceful protestors following nonviolent criticisms of the government. Several major examples follow below.

Jailed for a Tweet: Nabeel Rajab

Nabeel Rajab, the President of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, has been sentenced to three months in prison and is currently being held in al-Jaw prison. Rajab was sentenced for libel following a tweet in which he commented on the patriotism of al-Muharraq residents in Bahrain

following a visit to the community from the Prime Minister. He had suggested in his tweet that the Prime Minister was only welcomed by the people of Al-Muharraq community because the community needed government funds. Rajab is a prisoner of conscience and must be released immediately.

Jailed for Talking to the Media: Medical Workers

In March and April of 2011, 20 health workers and doctors were arrested in connection with the anti-government protests. Some of the health workers were reportedly tortured. Charges against them included “possession of unlicensed weapons,” “inciting hatred to the regime and insulting it,” “instigating hatred against another sect,” “occupation of a public building (Salmaniya Medical Complex),” “destroying public property,” and “calling for the overthrow of the regime by force.” Some, but not all, of these charges were later dropped.

No evidence was presented to prove that the 20 medical workers committed any crime. Amnesty International USA believes the accusations against them are unfounded. The real reasons for their arrest were said to be the fact that most of them had been vocal in giving interviews to foreign media and accusing the government of gross atrocities against protesters.

The medical workers were tried before a military court in Bahrain, and the twenty defendants were sentenced to between 5 and 15 years in prison. More recently, nine of the medical workers had their sentences reduced to between one month and five years in prison, following a transfer to civilian courts and subsequent appeals. Another two doctors, who were originally sentenced to 15 years in prison, had their appeal rejected because they were not present during the whole appeal process. The sentences of 15 years in prison imposed against them by a military court still stand until they appeal. The other nine were found not guilty.

All of the medical workers must have their convictions overturned and their sentences quashed. Six of the medical workers have not yet completed their sentences, but pending their appeals, are currently not in prison. Should they be rearrested, they would be prisoners of conscience, detained solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly.

Imprisoned Opposition Activists: Future Hearings Behind Closed Doors

13 prominent Bahraini opposition activists are serving prison terms ranging from two years to life imprisonment on bogus charges related to their participation in pro-reform protests in early 2011. To make matters worse, a Bahraini judge recently decided to move all future hearings of 13 prominent Bahraini opposition activists behind closed doors, where they would be filmed.

In response to the move, the 13 men have asked their lawyers not to represent them in court any longer. The men maintain their innocence and are prisoners of conscience, placed behind bars for peaceful political activities. Several of the defendants have spoken out in previous court

hearings to describe their alleged torture and other ill-treatment in detention, which included sexual assault and other acts of torture to coerce “confessions.”

Among these 13 prisoners of conscience are **Ebrahim Sharif** and **Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja**. Sharif is a prominent Sunni Muslim Bahraini who was sentenced to 5 years in prison and is considered by Amnesty International a prisoner of conscience. Sharif is a political reformer who led the National Democratic Action Society (Waad), a secular opposition party that brought together Sunnis and Shia Bahrainis to protest for democratic reforms. The 2011 US Department of State Human Rights Report described the charges faced by Sharif in his trial as “dubious.”

Al-Khawaja is a political and human rights activist who recently carried out a 110-day hunger strike in prison. The White House Office of the Press Secretary noted “continued concern for the well-being of jailed activist Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja” during his hunger strike, and called on the Government of Bahrain “to consider urgently all available options to resolve his case.”

Bahraini authorities have produced no evidence that Sharif, Al-Khawaja, or any of the other 11 jailed opposition activists were doing anything but exercising their basic human rights prior to their arrests and imprisonment.

Bahrain Teachers Association: Leaders Arrested and Sentenced

The Government of Bahrain has also imprisoned and allegedly tortured the former President of the Bahrain Teachers Association, Mahdi ‘Issa Mahdi Abu Dheeb, and convicted former Bahrain Teachers Association Vice President Jalila al-Salman, for peacefully exercising their right to freedoms of expression, association and assembly.

Abu Dheeb is serving a 10 year sentence in al-Jaw prison, and al-Salman was sentenced to three years in prison and has been released on bail pending appeals. Their convictions must be overturned immediately, and Abu Dheeb must be released from prison.

Conclusion

Each of these examples demonstrates that the Government of Bahrain continues to violate the human rights of peaceful, nonviolent critics. Amnesty International continues to call for the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience in Bahrain. Amnesty International urges the Bahraini authorities to carry out an independent investigation into all allegations of torture in detention and to bring those responsible to justice in fair trials.