

# BAHRAIN

monthly newsletter issued by the Bahrain Freedom Movement

## GCC Summit: No Room for Political Reforms

If the success or failure of a summit is judged by the extent of agreement or disagreement of the participants on the main issues of the present agenda, the recent summit in the Gulf was nothing but a failure. However, if success lies in the fact that the summit had been convened then the conference was a success. Only a year ago serious doubts were raised about the likelihood of convening the summit at the usual time in the present place because of the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. Now it is clear that not only Kuwait was liberated but the country has been made so safe that a big show of force became possible.

The convening of the 12th summit of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) is thus an achievement in itself.

That being said, the fact remains that many expectations that hinged on the summit have been dashed. It is thus not too unfair to describe the Kuwait conference as a failure. Sultan Qaboos of Oman will testify to this. He came to Kuwait with a proposal on the most sensitive issue that is at the core of the Gulf's problems, security. Much publicity was afforded to the Omani initiative weeks before the summit. They centered on a proposal to create a 100,000 strong force made up of local conscripts that will act both as a deterrent to any future threats and an absorbent force to contain and dampen the first phase of a major onslaught. The Saudis vetoed the proposals and sent a wave of anger through the Omani political circles. That unceremonious rebuff was enough to set the course of discussions through the few sessions which the leaders of the six countries of the GCC attended at their 3 day summit.

Furthermore, the hopeful inaugural tone of the Kuwaiti Emir, Sheikh Jaber Al Sabah, turned sour towards the end of the summit after witnessing the quashing of his initiative to create a unified entity comprising the six GCC countries. Apparently Sheikh Al Sabah, who had witnessed the total uselessness of the GCC during the crisis, saw no practical use of the continuation of the status quo and that the GCC has become a lame duck. However, his cautious invitation to his colleagues for an overhaul of the GCC went unheeded. The final communique known as 'The

Kuwait Declaration' did not mention anything regarding the issue of unity envisaged by Jaber's inauguration speech.

The messy situation the GCC heads of state found themselves in following the liberation of Kuwait was apparent from the numerous pledges they offered other powers including Egypt, Syria and the

such as the Omanis and the Qataris were rebuffed. It seems the Saudis came to the Summit with the intention to kill all initiatives that may eventually lead to a weakening of their position. Their strategy is to dominate the Gulf politically by vetoing any alternative viewpoint on the issues of new alliances, security of the

Gulf, relations with the US and ideologically by advocating and spreading their own brand of Islam as exemplified by Wahhabism. The Saudis are themselves lost in the midst of endless arguments on the pros and cons of any serious Iranian security initiative. The Iranian deputy Foreign Minister, Mohammed Ali Besharati, said in a recent interview with "Al Khaleej" newspaper published in Sharja, that Iran was ready to defend the six GCC states against any outside aggression. Such a situation brings the ball back into the GCC's court and the Saudis feel particularly embarrassed.

Perhaps the most important issue ignored by the Kuwait summit is the internal situation within the Gulf Countries. Political reforms are now long overdue because these countries are unique in their total disregard of human rights and freedoms. It was expected that the development in the world, especially in the aftermath of Kuwait's crisis, a serious review of the situation would take place with a view to institutionalising some form of political participation by the people. The summit has proved that anyone who thought rational behaviour would follow the crisis to be wrong. If anything it seems the regimes of the Gulf Countries feel a greater deal of freedom in pursuing their old style by the ruling families. Accountability is not tolerated and no constitutional forum for airing public views is ever allowed.

This unique situation is a major source of instability in the Gulf and there is a limit to the tolerance of the people. Continuing the old style policies can never bring about the required stability. No power on earth can provide the means to establish a prosperous situation other than the people themselves. No summit will ever be fruitful unless it deals seriously with issues of freedom, political participation and the respect of human rights.



United States of America, especially on issues of security of the region. The Damascus Declaration, signed a few months after the liberation, by the GCC states, Egypt and Syria, had its military aims frozen and the Secretary General of the GCC envisaged a "New Arab Order" based on the Damascus Declaration. In order to make a point, the Kuwait Summit allocated US \$10bn as a special fund for development in the Arab world. This was seen as an attempt to appease Cairo and Damascus and compensate them for their war efforts and to keep them quiet on the issue of security. Again failure is the only appropriate word to describe the outcome in this respect.

One of the most important dilemmas the GCC has faced is its relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran following their political debacle over their relations with Iraq which resulted in the occupations of Kuwait and the war that ensued therefrom. They could not agree on a framework for relations with Iran and moderate voices

# Dr Al-Mahmood: Interned for his opinion

The Bahrain University Lecturer Dr. Abdul Latif Al-Mahmood was arrested on 14 December at the airport after his arrival from Kuwait where he had delivered a lecture at a seminar organised by the University of Kuwait.

The theme of the seminar was "Future Perspective for Unity amongst GCC Countries", in which he outlined his views on the necessary conditions to achieve unity, the factors causing its delay and the future perspective for popular participation.

He argued that the basic causes of failure in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are "the personal/tribal conflicts between Gulf governments, the absence of popular participation, the non-existence of effective constitutional frameworks, the lack of a non-biased judicial system, the restrictions imposed on the media and the vicious use of sectarian division and tribalism as a basis for governing".

He also called for "an end to the prerogatives unfairly enjoyed by children of the royal families", such as "reserving one-third of the State's budget for their personal use", "implementing a master-slave relationship with the people", "exemption from payment of customs and other bills for electricity, water, telephone, etc..." "immunity from accountability", "reserving senior posts for themselves, despite being unqualified", etc..

He urged the Gulf rulers "not to consider popular participation as a form of gratitude" and called for the "establishment of social justice", prohibition of "using authority as a means of personal wealth generation", "allowing for utilisation of national human resources and freedom of expression" and "putting an end to injustice and oppression".

Fairly minded people would agree that what Dr Al-Mahmood stated was merely an articulation of the principles underlining the inalienable rights enjoyed by citizens of modern states, where political and civil liberties are based on the basic concepts of accountability and popular participation.

Earlier this month, replying to a journalist's question, the Bahrain Information Minister said that such people (like Dr. Al-Mahmood) are a threat to "stability".

This is a misconception. While no one denies the importance of stability and order for the existence of human beings, civilized history has proved that achieving the compliance of the people through fear is counter-productive. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nation in 1948 provides an international code for securing the basic right entitled to human beings.

On the other hand the Bahrain State

Security Law of 1974, considers the mere talking about these concepts a punishable crime which entitles the Interior Minister to order the administrative detention of people, like Dr. Al-Mahmood, for up to three years, renewable. This time Dr. Al-Mahmood was fortunate enough to be fined 500 Dinars (US\$1300) after two weeks in detention. Others are spending their tenth year for "offences" similar to those of D. Al-Mahmood.

It is not surprising for the Al-Khalifa government of Bahrain to be condemned by international human rights organisations for its cruel and degrading treatment of political suspects. It is, however, surprising that countries like the United Kingdom, which claim to champion the cause of human rights and democracy, and insist on linking their foreign relations with Commonwealth and Eastern European countries to turn a blind eye to abuses of human rights in Bahrain.

Indeed, the people of Bahrain believe that these countries actually support the abuse of human rights. This is a fact Bahrain internal security systems, responsible for torturing (in some cases leading to death), imprisoning, persecution, surveillance and controlling every walk of life in Bahrain is run by BRITISH subjects such as Mr Jim Bell (Director General of Public Security) and Ian Henderson (Director of State Security Investigations).

# Ted Heath knows better about Bahrain's Prisons



Most British politicians are not as familiar with the situation in the Gulf as Mr Edward Heath. After all he has been a Prime Minister and headed other key posts during his political career.

However, Mr Heath's experience with the affairs in the tiny island of Bahrain is of a paramount importance, and dates back more than thirty years. This experience benefited him at times but caused him some trouble at others. In 1960 Edward Heath was the Lord Privy Seal and had special interests in the colonies. In December of that year Mr Heath as Lord Privy Seal visited Bahrain on his way back to Britain from South East Asia. That visit coincided with a public uproar in Britain related to the continued imprisonment of three Bahrainis at a British Colony, St Helena, an island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, west of Africa. Until this day St. Helena, which was also the prison place of the French Leader, Napoleon Bonapart, is cut off from the rest of the world except for the occasional steamer that sails there now and then.

The cruelty of the rulers of Bahrain chose no other place in the world to chain their prisoners than St. Helena. Three men had been sentenced to fourteen years imprisonment in December 1956 because of their leadership role in the popular uprising that had engulfed Bahrain for more than two years. The three were Abdul

Rahman, Al Bakir, Abdul Aziz Al Shamlan and Abd Ali Al Elaiwat. Two more people had been sentenced to ten years and were being jailed in a small island known as Jida, west of Bahrain. They were Ibrahim Mousa and Ibrahim Fakhroo. The movement that they had led was calling for parliamentary life, reform of the judiciary and the right to establish trade unions. Following the sentence of five of the eight members of the "National Union Committee", a decision was taken by the ruler of Bahrain and the British government to exile three of the five to St Helena, and by January 1957 they were on the remote island. That action infuriated many people, even in Britain, and a legal battle started against the deportation of the three Bahrainis.

Since the beginning, the British government knew the action was illegal and thus attempted to delay the court action as much as possible. British documents confirm this point clearly. However, it also knew that the day of reckoning would come sooner or later, and by 1960 the House of Commons was the scene of furious debate about the case. Members of Parliament such as Mr Warbey, Mr

## Advertising Bahrain

"Bahrain is a modern, open society and very compatible to Western lifestyle" so claims an advert in a Western newspaper advertising for vacancies in Bahrain. It is a typical example of the false image which the Bahraini government tries to promote.

Modernism, openness and compatibility mean different things to different people. Modern is a term used by Al-Khalifa ruling family to signify things like architecture, highways, parks and leisure facilities.

Human aspects are not included, thus there is no need for elections as the ruling family is accountable to no one. The head of state "the Emir", his brother "the Prime Minister", his son "Heir Apparent" and the cabinet ministers (dominated by the ruling family) hold their positions for life. There is no separation of power, so the Prime Minister can legislate, execute and judge whether or not he is OK. He also permits himself to compete with fellow citizens in every commercial activity, through his Unitag group by which he ensures that he gets the lion shares in profits.

Openness is defined as opening the Emir, Heir Apparent and Prime Minister palace's gates two hours a week for selected audience to enjoy a cup of coffee and a chat with their highness. The three figure heads would insist this is more open than the British House of Commons. They would also challenge their audience if they can name a king or head of state in the

West who opens his doors as they do. Failing to do so results in presenting some of them with, maybe a plot of land or a ticket to enjoy a month's holiday in London on the palace's account.

The Emir is also more open to the white European and American communities in Bahrain. He welcomes them every Friday afternoon in his private luxurious beach. The person of the day may win jewellery or a gold watch and much more. He also insists that they call him by his favourite nick-name "Jack".

Compatibility is perfect for the Western communities. All sorts of flamboyance

are available. Westerners are exempt from taxes and are therefore entitled to an allowance of 100% of their high salaries, free accommodation, free fuel, electricity and water, and all that can be dreamt of. It does not matter how this "generous" ruling family treats the indigenous population.

Bahrain in a sense is worse than South Africa. In the latter, such discrimination is bravely drafted into laws, which are being repealed nowadays. In Bahrain, the indigenous suffer from an informal apartheid system which is protected and propped-up by Western "democracies".

## GENERAL CENSUS: Figures speak for themselves

The seventh General Census was carried out last month. The total population has been shown by the census to be 518,248 of which foreigners represent 37.8%. Over the last decade increases in the number of natives and foreigners has been 83,856 and 83,589 respectively. In percentage terms these increases are 24% and 43%, i.e., foreign workers have been brought to the country at a rate higher than the rate of population growth.

Officials have attributed the increase of foreign workforce to the increasing demand for human resources. However, the same period has seen a rise in the number of the unemployed among the natives. It is estimated that up to 20,000 Bahrainis are out of work. If, as is estimated, the total native workforce is 100,000, unemployment among Bahrainis is 20% of the

workforce.

Many of the unemployed are educated and some of them have a university degree!

In neighbouring countries, Bahrainis are forced to take low-paid jobs and incidents of humiliation often occur.

The state of employment is linked to the political situation. Bahrain can easily absorb all its work force, but the government prefers not to rely on its own citizens to run the country lest that reliance gives it trouble at times of crisis. It is easier to deal with foreign employees than with natives and continuous fear of strikes and demonstrations has led the government to the policy of maintaining a balance in the workforce between natives and foreigners.

Fletcher, Mr Stonehouse and Mr Healey were prominent in their questions on the case which was proving to be an embarrassment.

The Lord Privy Seal knew he would be questioned extensively, both by the opposition Labour party and by MPs from his own party, after returning to Britain from Bahrain. He thus took the opportunity to visit the jail at the island of Jida and met the two detainees, Ibrahim Mousa and Ibrahim Fakhroo. On his arrival back in London he addressed the House of Commons in mid January and described his visit to the prison at Jida. He gave the impression that the political prisoners were happy, had no complaints and everything seemed fine.

Another conservative MP, George Brown, who had also visited Jida gave a similar account.

These statements instigated an uproar in London, both in Westminster and in the press. The "Spectator" championed the attacks on these statements in a number of its January and February issues and expressed sorrow at the account of both Mr Heath and Mr Brown. The latter tried to correct himself by replying to the attack of the "Spectator" without success. The Lord Privy Seal was subjected to harsh questioning at the House of

Commons especially due to the fact that the issue of the legality of the removal of the three prisoners from Bahrain to St Helena was being dealt with by the courts.

The British officials including members of the Political Agency and Political Residency in Bahrain were trying to paint a good picture of the overall situation in Bahrain including the treatment of prisoners both at Jida and St Helena. Mr E.P. Wiltshire of the Agency sent a report to Mr R.A. Beaumont of the Arabian Department at the Foreign Office on 7th January 1961 to assist him in countering the accusations against the suitability of the Bahrain prisons.

"This (report) may come in useful if the St Helena prisoners pressure group continue to harp on the character of the penal arrangements in Bahrain", Mr Wiltshire wrote "The fact that common prisoners (but not political prisoners) wear chains might be twisted by an opposition spokesman into a sign of barbarity", he admitted. He also added that "one third of a sentence is remitted for good behaviour".

In the report Mr Wiltshire described the "imprisonment" of members of Al Khalifa family; "I also met Sheikh Abdul Aziz, the brother of the Chief of Police, who is confined to the island after drinking

bouts..... He is living in "Block E" which is for V.I.P.'s and cannot any longer called the European Prison. Two of the rooms in it (One can hardly think of these as cells as they are so pleasant) are furnished".

Returning to the two prisoners, they had to endure their sentence to the full. On the accession of the present ruler, Sheikh Isa to the throne in December 1962 following the death of his father, 50 prisoners who had been sentenced on criminal charges were released but he refused to set free the two political detainees.

The history of Bahraini prisoners and prisoners is a long and sad one. And what Edward Heath and George Brown saw was a white-washed situation that had been tailor made to please the British dignitaries. The same story is being repeated today. No remittance of a sentence of a political prisoners, no improvement in prison conditions for them and no denunciation of the low standards of human rights in Bahrain. The old policies of turning a blind eye to Al Khalifa's excesses that the Lord Privy Seal strived to prop up is still the order of the day in British-Al Khalifa relations! Edward Heath, who has no less than 30 years of dealing with Bahrain can still do something about it.

# BAHRAIN: URGENT STEPS NEEDED TO IMPROVE DISMAL HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD

On the occasion of Bahrain's National Day (Monday, December 16, 1991), ARTICLE 19 has called on the Bahraini government to take urgent measures to improve its dismal human rights records and to respect the promise made by Prime Minister Al Khalifa in December 1990 to support the "re-introduction of democracy in the political life of Bahrain". The ruling Al Khalifa family disbanded the limited democratic process in 1975 and since then have even removed from the Constitution the clause which states that "no provision of the Constitution may be suspended except during a state of emergency".

In the Censorship News: Time for change in Bahrain, ARTICLE 19 reports that all political organisations are banned, trade union rights are severely circumscribed, draconian censorship laws gag the domestic and foreign media, and all but the major religious festivals are prohibited. Large numbers of people are arrested merely for criticizing the Government, many are held for long periods without charge or trial and some are subjected to torture. An appalling number have died in detention seemingly as a result of torture.

Said Essoulami, Middle East research co-ordinator for ARTICLE 19 commented: "Deplorable violations of human rights continue in Bahrain and are hidden from the scrutiny of the international community by pervasive censorship and the gagging of national and foreign press. International attention must focus on Bahrain if actual improvements in human rights are to be achieved."

ARTICLE 19's recommendations to the Bahraini Government include the following:

- repeal the State Security Law which, among other things authorize the detention without charge or trial of suspects for up to three years, and longer at the direction of the Minister of the Interior;

- release all prisoners detained for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association or assembly, including all those who have

been held without charge or trial, many for several years;

- declare a firm policy that torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment will not be tolerated and investigate claims of torture, especially those cases which have resulted in deaths in detention;

- recognize the right to freedom of association and in particular the right to form political parties;

- abolish censorship of the media and, in particular, repeal the following provisions of the 1979 Press and Publication Code including Articles 10 and 13 which require the authorization of the Minister of Information before any printed material, whether produced locally or abroad, may be circulated, and Article 5, which grants the Minister of Information power to ban the printing of any newspaper or other

publication.

- hold free and democratic elections for councils and a national legislative assembly, and, as a first step, restore suspended articles of the Constitution which allow a measure of democratic participation.

Censorship News on Bahrain is available from ARTICLE 19, the International Centre Against Censorship, 90 Borough High Street, London, SE1 1LL. Telephone: 071-403 4822

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The National Assembly was dissolved by an Emir (Royal) Decree in 1975



**ARTICLE 19** is an organisation based in London and is dedicated to promote the issue of human rights with special emphasis on freedom of expression and derives its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states:

**"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers"**

A similar report was published by Amnesty International in May 1991.