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"Bahrain is like a ship that has gone adrift in the middle of the ocean" No compromise on legitimate demands

A British diplomat with a long experience in the region recently expressed his dismay and astonishment that none of the friends of Bahrain was courageous enough to bring pressure to bear on the Al Khalifa government to talk to the opposition. In his opinion, Bahrain is now like a ship that has gone adrift in the middle of the ocean, with no captain or anyone else willing to intervene to put it on the right course. His remarks are now echoed by many experts who could see sinister motives behind the reluctance of the friends of Bahrain to take positive steps to curtail the excesses of that regime as it cracks down on opponents. The worry has become even more following the unjust execution of Isa Ahmad Hassan Qambar, 28, who was executed last month for allegedly taking part in the killing of a policeman last year. The conviction relied only on circumstantial evidence, prompting international human rights organisations, including Amnesty International to express its disapproval of the verdict. To the Al Khalifas, the Al is biased, since it calls for international standards to be observed. Moreover, the Amir, Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, is becoming more involved in the killings that take place in the country. He has just issued (20 March) two unconstitutional decrees to widen the scope of the State Security Court, turning it into a martial-like kangaroo court for all cases of any nature. Mr. Ian Henderson continues to pursue a policy of heavy-handedness and likes to see the law he had proposed 22 years ago, the notorious State Security Law, implemented to the full. It was the proposal by Mr. Henderson of the bill that led to the catastrophic consequences culminating in the suspension of the Constitution and the dissolution of parliament.

The anxiety of some concerned politicians is made even more acute by the fact that the government has not shown any inclination towards reconciliation and is adopting a policy of unrestrained confrontation. The Al Khalifa believe that it could contain the crisis through its campaign of terror, intimidation and mass collective punishment. These harsh measures are meant to deter people from taking part in the movement and create fear in the hearts and minds of innocent people, but the contrary is happening. There is a great bravery amongst the people of Bahrain to the extent that whole families would take part in street demonstrations, an indication of the alienation of the Al Khalifa tribal dynasty. The daily warnings by the American and British embassies in Manama for their citizens not to appear unnecessarily in public and to avoid certain locations show how serious the situation in Bahrain has become. The people of Bahrain certainly do not want

their country to become a fortress, but the government has escalated the situation in the hope that by raising the stakes, it may win the battle that has cost her dearly.

It is now hard to deny the fact that there is a genuine political movement in Bahrain with humble but firm constitutional demands. It is also difficult to ignore the malpractices of the Al Khalifa and their tendency to distort images and alter facts. And as the number of their victims becomes larger so does the people's determination to realise their demands. After all, demanding a swift return to the constitutional life could in no way be considered a serious threat to the stability of the country. Both the American and the British governments, with the highest stakes in Bahrain, know this fact.

When the Al Khalifa of Bahrain took the decision to execute Mr. Qambar it became even more clear that it was a sign of weakness of the government and not strength. Its main aim was to deter people from insisting on their demands. However, the reaction of the masses surpassed all expectations and the country erupted in hostile demonstrations for the following four days. It became clear that with the deteriorating security situation, the people are becoming more willing to take serious risks in their endeavour to effect a change in their country. Today, the opposition has been encouraged by the response of the people to the repression of the Al Khalifa. They are also encouraged by the positive coverage in the international media. The government might have calculated that its heavy-handed measures against the people including summary trials, mass arrests, collective punishments, violating rights of the children and threatening to impose martial law and deployment of armed forces to the streets would cause the mass movement to abate. To the surprise of everybody, each drop of blood from an innocent man or woman has become a source of inspiration to thousands of people.

It seems the situation has reached a stalemate. The government insists on continuing policies of repression and ignoring people's demands. To this end they are employing all methods of terror and attempting to show a solid refusal of any compromise. On their part, the people are determined to achieve a constitutional political situation. Governments which enjoy friendly relations with the Al Khalifa are duty-bound to press them to acquiesce to the constitutional demands. Both London and Washington have a duty to stop their support of the repressive policies of the Bahraini government. They are supplying the know-how in the fields of security and military affairs. Their experts are present in the country and are witnessing the

flagrant violation of human rights. The opposition has repeatedly condemned all kinds of violence especially those adopted by the government. It has called for a dialogue as the way out of the crisis. Some friends of Bahrain have also expressed their wish to see dialogue between the two parties. Lord Avebury, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Human Rights Group in London has recently launched an initiative and sent a detailed programme to Bahrain's Crown Prince who visited both London and Washington last month. But he received no positive response so far. The Kuwaiti prime minister also called for dialogue but his call fell on deaf ears. The Saudi Crown Prince was also quoted as saying that the way forward in Bahrain was for the government to start negotiating with the people. None of these calls has been heeded. It is time for greater powers which are propping up the dictatorial regime of the Al Khalifa to speak out in favour of constitutional rule, end repression and human rights violation, release political prisoners especially women and children, and return to civilised rule as called for by the country's constitution. Failing to take steps in this direction can only lead to further complications of the situation not only in Bahrain but in the whole Gulf. For the people of Bahrain there is no way backward. They have given enough sacrifices over the last 16 months, and are not ready to compromise their legitimate demands. They know that they can no longer coexist with the Al Khalifa outside the bounds of the constitution. Peaceful transition to a more modern political regime must be encouraged.

Opposition forces coordinate

On 11 March, a meeting was held between Bahraini political forces, at the end of which a statement was signed by the Popular Front of Bahrain, the National Liberation Front of Bahrain, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain and the Bahrain Freedom Movement.

The statement said "The opposition forces believe in the national consensus which views the only exit out of the current political crisis is for the regime to be courageous and rational in its approach. This can be achieved through abandoning the repressive policy and by not blaming the outside for the problem. What is needed can be summarized as: initiating a process of dialogue, releasing all political prisoners and detainees, allowing forcible exiles to return home, compensating victims of oppression, revoking the State Security Law as well as some articles in the Penal Code and laws concerning gatherings and assembly".

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March 1996: The Ruling Al-Khalifa Family murders

1 March: The Bahraini security forces attacked the small village of Abo-Gowa, 5 km west of the capital Manama at 8.30 pm local time. The siege by 400 fully-armed riot police continued until 3.00 am of Saturday, 2 March. House-to-house breaking-in took place and many young people were arbitrarily detained. Screams of women were heard as the undisciplined forces attacked houses and started beating people indiscriminately. This latest attack comes as part of a series of attacks on residential areas implementing the policy of "preventative measures" referred to by the prime minister in his recent statements on the events. Other areas that were attacked in the past few days include Dair, Daih, Sanabis, Duraz, Bani Jamra, Jonnossan, Karzakkan, Malkeya, Sitra, Marwazan, Arad, Demestan and Samahij.

At midnight of 3 March, the undisciplined and forces mounted a vicious attack on the village of Demestan (south-west of Bahrain). Families were attacked and many youths were snatched. Later, a similar attack was mounted against Karabad village and clashes resulted in many people arrested.

3 March: The Bahraini crown prince, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa arrived, Sunday 3 March, in London starting a tour that took him to Washington and back to London. US circles advised him to resort to dialogue. Lord Avebury proposed an initiative to resolve the crisis but the crown prince refused.

At evening (5 March) Sanabis, 5 km west of Manama, was besieged and Budaya Highway was sealed-off in that area. Heavy clashes were reported, houses were raided and many were arrested. It was also reported that live ammunition was fired as well as rubber bullets and tear gas.

One of the leading lawyers, Mr. Abdulla Abdul Rahman Hashim, was summoned by the intelligence department at 12.00 am of 5 March. Mr. Hashim was accused of agitation and contacting outside organizations. The outside organization refers to the BBC Arabic Radio which interviewed Mr. Hashim on the political situation in Bahrain.

6 March: Several loud explosions, believed to be those of gas cylinders, were heard in Ma'amir area (Sitra) and around Manama. The students of Schla Intermediate, Jedhafs Secondary, Sheikh Abdulaziz Secondary, Jaberya Secondary schools staged simultaneous demonstrations. Security forces continued raiding houses and amongst the twelve arrested on 6 March from Sanabis is Dr. Nabil Al-Sadadi, 38 years old. The authorities continued publishing statements ahead of the major US-Gulf business conference to be held on 10 March. The nervous security forces have been mounting security operations in Sanabis and Daih as these are the nearest areas to the conference venue.

An explosion in Isa Town on Wednesday 6 March at 22.00 local time resulted in the death of one person and injury of two others, according to government's sources. The explosion occurred at the automatic teller machine of a local bank. The explosion in the National Bank of Bahrain is still a mystery. The person who was killed is Mohammed Hassan Taher Samih

from Iskan-Jedhafs (new residential area of Jedhafs). Two persons were also injured one of them is serious. The injured are Mohammed Al-Mukhtar and Aqeel Najji, both from Iskan-Jedhafs. On Tuesday night (5 March) riot police attacked Iskan-Jedhafs and arrested several people.

9 March: Students in several schools marched in protest against the mass jailing of innocent peaceful people and the intimidation of residents by foreign-staffed security forces. Demonstrations re-surfaced in Jedhafs, Sanabis, Nuaim, Jaberyah, Sheikh Abdulla, Ahmad Al-Omran, Manama secondary (girls) and several other schools. Security forces stormed Jedhafs boys and girls schools and arrested many students. Similarly, riot police entered and attacked other schools to silence students.

The notorious Khalid Al-Wazzan and his units attacked the small village of Jannossan again and arrested many people.

On 11 March, clashes erupted in Karzakkan Boys and Sar Girls schools. Other schools including Salmaniya, Nuaim, Jedhafs, Jaberya, Sheikh Abdulla, Ahmad Al-Omran, Duraz, have all witnessed clashes with riot police. Twelve boys from Jedhafs (maximum age of 13) were lined up before the wall and a policeman (working for the Bahrain security forces) was seen crushing their heads with the rough walls. Clashes were also reported on 12 March in Karzakkan, Iskan-Jedhafs, Qadam, Sar, Jannossan and Sanabis.

12 March: The family of the victim who the security forces claimed was killed in an explosion was denied the right to bury its son. A group of armed riot policemen buried the university student, Hassan Taher Sameeh, in the early hours of Tuesday 12 March in Hoorah Cemetery far away from his residence in Iskan-Jedhafs. Crowds of people gathered around the house in anger, but security forces attacked and dispersed the gathering.

A bus that was taking students of Bahrain University from Sakhr campus to Isa Town campus was stopped by members of the intelligence department and riot police who had established check-points around the campuses. Riot police savagely attacked the students (male and female) and a clash broke out spontaneously. Many students were injured and were left bleeding. Female students had their headscarves removed and pulled from their hairs out of the bus. Many were arrested. One person from the attacking forces was also injured, and his case was broadcast by local media while ignoring those student left bleeding in and around the bus.

Meanwhile, the Kuwaiti Al-Talea newspaper reported on 12 March that thirty members of the ruling family from the lower ranks submitted a letter to the Amir and prime minister on 10 February requesting to equate them in the privileges and monthly payments granted to all members of the ruling family.

14 March: A restaurant in Sitra was mysteriously set ablaze in the early hours (5.00 am). Seven workers who were sleeping on the first floor above the restaurant died as a result of the blaze. This tragic event brought to light the vicious cycle of violence being fostered by the

Bahraini government. In Sitra, more than 400 people were rounded up.

On Friday, the editorial of the semi-official paper Akhbar Al-Khalij implicitly called for the "erasing of villages". Hence, Sitra people continued to suffer from the vicious and arbitrary attacks by riot police and black-uniformed special forces. On Saturday 16 March at 2.25 pm local time, Bahrain TV interrupted its programme to claim that the interior ministry had arrested some people and blamed them for the mysterious attack on a restaurant which was set ablaze on Thursday causing the tragic death of seven guest-workers who were sleeping on the first floor.

The Bahraini security forces attacked Daih, Sanabis and Jedhafs on Friday 15 March and sealed off the area as well as the main Budaya Highway. Demonstrators in Daih reached the main highway before the arrival of security forces. Door-to-door breaking-in operation was conducted and many people were arrested. Riot police clashed with demonstrators in A'ali and Hamad Town on Friday night (15 March). A'ali Sport Club was caught in fire and security forces sealed off the area. On 16 March, security forces besieged Bori village (south of Bahrain) and attacked a peaceful demonstration. Scores of youth were arrested.

The Cassation Court ruled in a session held on 17 March to uphold the death sentence against Isa Ahmad Hasan Qambar accused of causing the death of a member of the intelligence department on 22 March 1995 (a year ago) in Nuwaidrat. This is the only political case to be heard before a criminal court. All other political cases come under the State Security Court. Last year, the Criminal Court had passed the death sentence and the Supreme Civil Court of Appeal had endorsed it. The Cassation Court also upheld the life sentence against Mohammad Ali Khatim Al-Qadi who, five-year prison terms against Mansoor Makki, Yunis Salih Musa Al-Sanini, Ishaq Husain Yousuf Marhoon and Hamza Habib Al-Shaikh. The approval of the sentences is viewed as a message to the opposition and it comes a day after the haphazard accusation of seven people accused of setting fire to the restaurant in Sitra. The security authorities arbitrarily picked-up seven persons instead of its previous claim that five masked men threw petrol bombs.

On 18 March, students in Manama Secondary Girls School staged a protest denouncing the government and calling for restoration of parliament. The headmistress called in security forces and an officer by the name Khalil Al-Saati together with a group of riot police attacked the students with batons. Several students were injured and the ambulance was called in to take the injured to hospital. 60 students were dismissed. On the same day demonstrations were reported in Nuweidrat, Eker, and Hamad Town. Security forces attacked protesters deploying rubber bullets and tear gas.

A bomb exploded on Tuesday 19 March 6.30 pm local time, at Baisan International Hotel in Qudeibeya district of Manama. The Associated Press reported that (ten minutes after tonight's explosion, a man telephoned The Associated Press and said in Arabic-accented

Isa Qambar and threatens to "wipe out villages"!

English: "Listen. Fifteen kilograms. Bomb. Baisan Hotel"). The bombing is the third of such attacks since last January when security forces launched a massive crackdown against the pro-democracy opposition.

The official Gulf News Agency reported (19 March) that "Interior Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Khalifa Al-Khalifa met Defence Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Ahmad Al-Khalifa and exchanged views to increase joint coordination for the interest of the country".

On 20 March, the interior ministry changed its mind regarding the number of people it had arrested in connection with the burning of restaurant in Sitra. Four people were haphazardly picked up from the 400 arrested in Sitra and all have been falsely accused of setting fire to Zaytun Restaurant in Sirat Wadiyan on 13 March. The four are Ali Ahmad Abdullah al-Afsor, 31, labourer; Ahmad Khalil Ibrahim al-Kattab, 30, labourer; Qumbar Khamis Ali Qumbar, 22, labourer; and Khalil Ibrahim Abdullah Khamis, 21, labourer.

The Amir issued two decrees on Wednesday (20 March) widening the powers of the State Security Court and empowering it to look into any case which the interior ministry officers may consider to be security-related. The decrees also make it easy of the unconstitutional State Security Court to rush the passing of tougher sentences (without any right of appeal for defendants). Mass demonstrations took to the streets on Wednesday night (20 March) and continued on Thursday 21 March, around the country in response to a call by the opposition. Demonstrators in Sanabis released balloons carrying slogans in support of the jailed leader Sheikh Abdul Amir Al-Jamri and blaming the security forces for committing arson against innocent nationals and residents of Bahrain. Helicopters were deployed to bring down the balloons. Semi-martial law was imposed on Sitra island on Thursday (21 March) preventing people from going out of their houses until midday. Demonstrators reaffirmed their peaceful approach and called for the restoration of the dissolved parliament and release of political prisoners. The Associated Press reported from Bahrain stating (police sealed off several Shiite villages around Manama. In Sanabis, clusters of women hid behind walls, while men ran on the streets, apparently to avoid arrest in police raids. "There's a raid. There's a raid," a terrified woman clad in a black, head-to-toe Islamic cloak shouted at a reporter. "Get out of here before you, too, are taken." A dozen bonfires made of car tires, garbage cans and trash burned in Sanabis and the neighboring villages of Diraz and Bani Jamra). At around 4.00 pm around 100-150 women gathered alongside the main Budayya Highway in front of Daih entrance raising slogans "We are not saboteurs, we demand restoration of constitution". Half an hour later, security forces attacked the area and fired tear gas and rubber bullets.

Security forces attacked young boys and girls in schools on 20 March and in Samhij Primary School a 9-year boy was injured by a fire bomb thrown into the school by agents of the intelligence department.

23 March: Bahraini schools witnessed a

series of protests with absenteeism reaching a record high of around 90% in many places. In other schools, students attended only to stage protests and call for political reforms. On Saturday, 23 March, the students of Hamad Secondary Girls Schools staged a sit-in and raised slogans calling for restoration of parliament and release of political prisoners. Security forces attacked the protest and savagely beaten the girls. On the next day, the school erupted in protests and again clashes with security forces were reported. Similarly, in Isa Town Girls Schools, students staged a protest raising pro-democracy demands. Security forces attacked the students and many of them were unable to walk back home because of the severity of the beating. Two girls were arrested, one of them Zainab Seyed Ibrahim, 17, disappeared since then and no one could trace where she is detained.

26 March: The Bahraini security forces carried out the execution of Mr. Isa Ahmad Qambar in the early hours of Tuesday 26 March 1996. The execution is viewed as a political murder by the opposition since the trial sessions were politically motivated. The killing of Isa Qambar indicates how the Al-Khalifa ruling family intended to exacerbate the situation. Instead of listening to demands from international human rights organization for fair and just trial, they went ahead and approved a politically-motivated death sentence. Bahrain now faces a more bleak future. The call for democratic reforms would be strengthened as people will be seeking the implementation of justice on those security officers who murdered 14 people in the past year. For example, the murderer of Saeed Al-Eskafi, the 16-year old boy who was tortured and sexually abused to death last July, must stand trial in the name of justice and equality.

Many places erupted in anger including, for the first time Ghoreifa and Jufair, suburbs in Manama, where the US Fifth Fleet is located. Riot police attacked the area and smashed private cars and ransacked houses. Shops were closed, schools deserted and houses in uprising areas switched-off the lighting as a sign of mourning. The four main opposition groups issued a joint statement yesterday, 26 March, accusing the ruling family of exacerbating the situation and calling on the people to declare a week of mourning for the soul of Isa Qambar.

27 March: Three young people were brought before the state security court on 27 March, and sentenced in accordance with the recently issued decrees providing more arbitrary powers for the court. Adel Al-Tal, 23 years old from Tobli was sentenced to twelve years imprisonment and a fine of 32,000 dinars (about \$80,000), Mr. Abbas Mofatih, 27, from Tobli and Abbas Salim, 26, from Jed-Ali were sentenced to five years imprisonment. These arbitrary sentences had no legal back-up or justification. The trial was one of the fastest yet and it took the court less than an hour to rubber-stamp sentences. Lawyers were prevented from properly defending the accused and had not been allowed to meet with the defendants. (On 7 April, three persons are to appear before the State Security Court: Hussain Al-Mahoozi, Ibrahim Al-

Barbari, and Abdulamir Jaffer).

On 27 March, at around 8:00 pm, demonstrators took to the street in the heart of Manama, in the area between Momin mosque and the Qalaa Police Fort. Riot police spread in the area, attacked the demonstration and established check points. Sanabis came under attack and residents were forced to stay inside. Most schools were empty today as students decided to go on strike.

Karzakan has been besieged and no exit or entry was allowed. Tobli was also the scene of more clashes (from Tobli roundabout into Hujer). Clashes in Duraz continued and roads are full of stones, rocks, sticks, etc. Similar protests continued in Bani Jamra, Jedhafs, Karanah and Sitra. Daih was also under attack and siege. Security forces attacked the small village of Shakhora and arrested 35 women with ages ranging from 10 to 55. Later they released 30 but kept five of them in detention.

The Bahraini opposition consolidated its peaceful and civil resistance following the execution of Isa Qambar and wide-spread arrests of women and children. In Sitra, women and children marched on 30 March at 7.00 pm and clashed with security forces. Similarly in Isa Town demonstrators clashed with riot police several scores were arrested. On 27 March several children were hit by rubber bullets in Sitra including Mohammed Redha Abdelhussain Ali, 11 years old, and Hassan Makki, 11. Seven women were arrested in Shakhora: Zainab Saeed, 19, Nadeya Isa Ali Hassan, 16, Sakina Abdali, 24, Aminah Isa, 20, Ineesa Isa, 23, Reqeya Isa, 23, and Mona Um-Qassim, 30. Other women were also arrested from different areas: Khadija Ahmad Ali, 16, Najah Saeed Sabi together with her sisters Kaltham, Reqeya and Mahdeya, Shahraban Ali Nasser, 55, Sawsan Ali Salman, 20, Khatton Saeed, 16, and her sister Rabab, 19, Fatima Seyed Jaffer, 19, and her sister Masooma, 15, Zainab Seyed Falah, 16, Kaltham Seyed Adnan, 16, Kholod Jawad Ali, 16, and Radheya Amhad Ali, 40.

On 29 March, security forces ransacked the village of Abo-Gowa again, smashing properties, stealing jeweleries, beating men, women and children on the spot. In Jufair and Ghureifa districts of Manama, as well as in Arad (Muharraq) demonstrations took to the streets. Duraz is put under siege from 4.00 pm onwards to prevent the daily demonstrations from reaching the main highway. Similar sieges are implemented on Nuweidra and Karzakan.

The government attempted to cover-up the bad environment it created for foreign investors. Everyday, newspapers report high profits and shares dealing in the market. In fact the market is suffering. In the Gold Market, between 10-12 shops are planning to close down. In Sheaik Abdulla Road, shops rents has come down to 200-250 dinars but businessmen are not willing to start new businesses.

The Crown Prince Sheikh Hamad visited Riyadh on 30 March and met with Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah and Prince Sultan, following, the Saudi statements on the need for reconciliation in Bahrain. The Al-Khalifa ruling family has refused all calls for calming down the situation.

British media exposes the atrocities of the Al-Khalifa

On 14 March, at 7.00 pm GMT, the British Channel 4 TV showed the aftermath of one of the collective punishment attacks by security forces on Sanabis. Cars were smashed, youth aged between 15 and 24 were arbitrarily rounded up from their houses, houses were marked with "X" after storming to ensure no house is missed, an elderly was shown with a broken arm after a clash with security forces who stormed her house to arrest her son, etcas. Channel 4 also interviewed the father of Saeed Al-Eskafi who was sexually abused and tortured to death last July. A person showed the signs of cigarette's burns on his body. Graffiti on the walls were shown stating the aims of the movement: restoration of parliament. The parliament in accordance with Bahrain constitution has no power to change the government, hence the foreign minister claim that the pro-democracy movement aims for "one man, one vote, once" is untrue. The foreign minister also stated that a memorandum of understanding is being signed with the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) for inspecting prisons. It has now transpired that the government is refusing to accept the three conditions set-out by the ICRC which are: that the ICRC meets all detainees and prisoners, that such meetings shall be without the presence of an official and that these visits can be repeated at any time.

BBC Radio 4 exposed the atrocities and lies of the Bahraini government. In a 40-minute news analysis (File on 4) on 12 March 1996 at 7.20 pm GMT, BBC Radio 4 broadcast the voices of a demonstration as it took place in Daih last week with slogans of youth chanting "We are not saboteurs, we demand the restoration of constitution". Julian O'Halloran and his team interviewed citizens who had their houses ransacked and sons snatched as part of collective punishment schemes conducted by the Bahrain security forces. The father of martyr Saeed Al-Eskafi was interviewed and a moving description was given on how his son's body was drilled, ironed, and tortured until death. The Foreign Minister was also interviewed. The latter reiterated that the opposition is linked to "fundamentalism" and refused to answer if an investigation has been carried out to discipline those officers responsible for the death of Saeed Al-Eskafi.

David Mellor, ex-British Heritage Secretary confessed that he had never spoken to ordinary people of Bahrain, yet he finds it in his interest to defend the government. Radio 4 team said that they toured the worst affected villages and residential areas in Bahrain. Not once ever they came across a radical slogan, nor they ever witnessed any anti-British or anti-American feelings. All wall-writings demanded the resto-

ration of Bahrain parliament.

Professor Fred Halliday stated that if the ruling family persists in its attempts to crush the moderate movement then a more radical one will emerge to seek the overthrow of the government. Mr. Jassim Murad, member of the dissolved parliament and a senior business person said that while his Sri-Lankan servant enjoys democratic rights and votes for her representatives in Sri-Lanka, he has no say in his own country.

The programme is a major blow to the present visit by the crown prince and foreign minister. The latter demanded in his interview that Britain should expel the Bahraini opponents. The interviewer asked: Why did you deport them in the first place from Bahrain? The foreign minister found it very hard to understand that in free societies there is no place for his type of back-ward mentality which is trying to turn the clock backward.

All British quality newspapers covered the events in Bahrain in a balance way that angered the ruling Al-Khalifa family. The Financial Times quoted a Sunni merchant on 27 March say "solutions will become impossible if this gap continues to grow between the rulers and the people of this island, and not just the Shia". The Daily Telegraph blamed the government for the continued crisis, quoting diplomats.

Open letter to the nations of the world

The following letter has been signed by 10,000 Bahrainis who are living under the most severe crackdown ever carried out by the Bahraini security forces against the peaceful people of Bahrain. The letter reads as follows:

"To the leaders of world's governments... to the free nations of the world

Greetings.. You may all know, as has been documented by authentic news media, that the people of Bahrain, over the past several years, have submitted petitions, signed by the general public and by the intelligentsia, to the government of Bahrain, calling for the implementation of political and economical reforms compatible with rapidly changing environment. The petitions have called for positive response to satisfy the aspirations of the Bahraini people by allowing a free environment for political participation and socialization.

In 1994, the people of Bahrain initiated a popular petition sponsored by all sections and trends of the society, calling for the reinstatement of constitutional order in the country and re-establishing the grounds for democratic life through the restoration of parliament and allowing participation in the vital political process. However, the government did not agree to meet with the representatives (members of the Committee for Popular Petition) and consistently refused to listen to demands.

During the detention of leading opposition figures (April-September 1995) a semi-agreement was reached with the government regarding the demands and the way to handle them. Later, the government denied the existence of any understanding and denied any form of dialogue with leaders of the opposition. This has led the popular leaders to adopt peaceful

and constitutional steps to declare their refusal of the government policy that stands against dialogue. Following this encounter, the people responded with restraint in a highly civilized manner, calling for a serious dialogue between the opposition and the government. Nevertheless, the security apparatus responded by arresting the leading figures (in January 1996) as well as thousands of people, young, old and children. Alongside this, the people of Bahrain have been accused of extremism, violence and linkage with outside parties.

The people of Bahrain refuse all these accusations, and re-confirm the peaceful and constitutional approach for the national struggle and blame the intelligence apparatus of committing part of the arson and violence by attacking places of worship and planting explosives (this has led to uncontrolled and spontaneous reactions against these agitating and organized governmental attacks).

The people of Bahrain assure all governments and nations of the world of their peaceful nature and urge free people of the world to support the constitutional demands. We also urge all to intervene for convincing the government of Bahrain to stop its repressive policy and to accept the path of dialogue with the jailed leaders and to study the democratic and constitutional demands already raised. These demands - if implemented - will save the homeland from reciprocal and vicious violent cycle. We wish all just governments further security and stability and we wish for all nations freedom and dignity". (Signed by 10,000 Bahraini citizens). The names and signatures are retained with the Arab Organization for Human Rights - UK Branch.

Leading personalities issue a statement in support of Al-Shamlan

A hundred and seven personalities inside Bahrain issued a statement on 5 March protesting against the arrest of Mr. Ahmad Al-Shamlan.

"On 7 February 1996, at 5.00 am, the Bahraini security authorities arrested the lawyer and journalist Mr. Ahmad Isa Al-Shamlan, who is one of the members of the Committee for Popular Petition (CPP). The CPP is responsible for the petition that was signed by 25,000 citizens calling for the restoration of 1973 constitution, return of parliamentary life, public freedoms, granting the Bahraini women the right to elect and nominate and allowing exiles to return home. Mr. Al-Shamlan is a known activist for human rights and one who always volunteered to peacefully solve social and political problems that affect the homeland. Therefore, it is surprising that he had been accused of "agitating for violence, igniting fires and contacting outside terrorist organizations". The defender of human rights and the rejecter of violence can not be transformed to an agitator for violence, arson and sabotage. All what he wrote and all what he stated and signed are evidences proving his national, democratic and peaceful approach for reforms.

We as patriotic democrats affirm our rejection for violence from whatever source and call for the release of Mr. Ahmad Al-Shamlan and all political detainees, and call for allowing exiles to return so that they can practice their rights to live on their homeland and to open the channels of democratic dialogue and exchange of views that will save our country from the evils of disunity and hatred and will guarantee the national unity for a dignified and secure life".