

BAHRAIN

Issued by the "Bahrain Freedom Movement" for promoting Human and Constitutional Rights

The opposition seeks dialogue and warns against excesses by the regime Towards a peaceful solution

Stability (regional and local) is being upset by the behaviour of the ruling wing of the Al-Khalifa. Over the past two years, members of the ruling wing have attempted to sow the seeds of discontent in the region by creating troubles with the neighbouring state of Qatar, an attempt that soon rebounded and became an embarrassment to their troubled regime. Under pressure from almost every corner of the Gulf, the Al-Khalifa had to retreat from their anti-Qatar rhetoric and apologise to them for their misconduct. Last February, at the Dorchester Hotel in central London, the Crown Prince of Bahrain and the foreign minister met with the Qatari foreign minister and made a U-turn in their stands. After extending their apologies for the maltreatment of their Qatari captives four months ago, they were forced to agree to the Qatari demand that the border dispute should be left to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for settlement.

The withdrawal of the border dispute case from the ICJ was their main condition to attend the GCC summit in Doha last December. As the Qataris dragged their feet the Al-Khalifa boycotted the summit thereby creating a precedence in the history of the Gulf alliance. As their case began to falter, they had to rescind their demand and agree to what the Qataris have all along put forward as conditions for normalising the relations. As is always the case, despots often end up bending to their foes without gaining anything of significance.

The Al-Khalifa's antagonistic approach to their neighbours continued unabated. Instead of siding with their Kuwaiti cousins who had always supported them financially and politically, they have recently decided to offer moral support to Saddam Hussain. Last month a delegation from the appointed-Consultative Council called on Ibn Sina hospital in down town Baghdad and conveyed the prime minister's best wishes to Uday, Saddam's eldest son who had been wounded in a gun shoot-out last year. An earlier delegation led by a brother of the foreign minister, and a member of the Al-Khalifa led a trade delegation to Baghdad, much to the annoyance of the Kuwaitis. As early as 1992, just over a year after the liberation of Kuwait, the prime minister sent a congratulatory message to Saddam Hussain on his fiftieth birthday. The Al-Khalifa demanded more from the Kuwaitis, including the carrying out of crackdowns against Bahrainis living in Kuwait. On 26 March, 11 Bahrainis were arrested in Kuwait and accused of possessing anti-regime pamphlets.

Last November, the Al-Khalifa rebuffed their Saudi financiers and rejected an eleven-hour plea by Prince Sultan who had flown to Manama as he sought to use his good offices with

the Al-Khalifa to persuade them to attend the Doha summit.

This troublesome ruling elite is now severing almost all civilized links with the people of Bahrain. Instead of reconciling with the people they continued their policy of alienating the natives of the country by adopting every repressive measure possible against them. The latest war waged by the regime is manifested by the numerous dismissals of lecturers and students, some of whom were high calibre university lecturers. In addition to those who had already been dismissed by the military head of Bahrain University, Mohammed Jassim Al-Ghatam, a long list of Bahraini lecturers and staff has been prepared, and those destined for dismissal have already been approached and asked to submit their resignation or accept early retirement. None of these has accepted "the offer" and some of them has indicated that he/she would wait until officially dismissed by the military authorities of the University. The choice these intellectuals are given is not very generous; either submit your resignation or wait for Henderson's men to decide your fate. This is what happened with Dr. Zahra Al Zira, who was forced to submit her resignation under the threat that she would be handed over to Ian Henderson. This British torturer is attempting to plant fear in every corner of Bahrain for his readiness to inflict unlimited suffering on people who disobey his orders.

For over a quarter of a century since the British withdrawal from the Gulf, it has become clear that the security of the region is at stake, sometimes due to outside threats, but often due to inter-tribe feuding. The Al-Khalifa have a long record of hostile policies towards the people of Bahrain. The trial of more than eighty citizens was yet another indication of the tension in the country which is likely to erupt in more serious confrontations between the civilised nation and the barbaric mercenaries hired by the tribal rule of Al-Khalifa. They have failed to provide security to the people, and to themselves. They have failed to honour their commitment to the country's constitution and have jailed, tortured, killed or exiled thousands of citizens in their endeavour to crush the constitutional uprising. The people, on the other hand, have persistently called for dialogue as the only avenue to stability and tranquility. Members of the ruling wing of the Al-Khalifa have been intransigent throughout the crisis, whilst the opposition has all along extended their hands to the regime requesting dialogue in order to save the country from a bleak future.

The opposition, so far, has succeeded in keeping the emotions of the public under check, but it may not be a long time before feelings run high with the possibility of the situation getting

out of control. The people of Bahrain have been patient enough and it is dangerous to stretch that patience to the limit. In March, a leading opposition figure, Sheikh Isa Qassim issued a statement warning the government that if any of those put on trial was sentenced to death, then the population would respond by "putting on the coffin-cloths in preparedness for the defence of honour". On 28 March, Qassim tabled an initiative for the government for the establishment of national security. In this initiative, Qassim said "the security of the ruler and the rules can only be jointly established. As a pre-requisite, the government should release all prisoners (those sentenced by the unconstitutional security courts and those held in detention without trial)". This basic step will restore calm and thenceforward, peaceful dialogue can start for the restoration of civil rights.

It is therefore incumbent on those with good relations with the Al-Khalifa to use their good offices to persuade the regime to start dialogue with the peaceful opposition before the momentum for a peaceful outcome of the crisis is lost. It is clear from the Qatar episode that the Al-Khalifa are prone to pressure from outside, and a similar pressure must be brought to bear on those holding the key to the solution of the crisis. They must be told that they have only two choices; to develop or to disappear.

Media views on Bahrain

The claims of the Al-Khalifa family that they had discovered a plot to topple their rules was believed by no one. The root of the crisis remains unsolved: the restoration of democracy.

The Economist (8 March 1997) wrote on Bahrain saying "This week Bahrain's State Security Court began the closed-door trial of 59 people who were arrested last June. Soon after their arrest, half a dozen of the accused were paraded on television where they "confessed" to having been recruited by Iran, and trained by Hizbullah in Lebanon, in order to overthrow the Bahraini regime. Iran denied this, as it would. But doubts about the unsavoury parade were reinforced by contradictions in the testimony - and by the Bahrain security services' known propensity to turn to torture.

Political protest in Bahrain has its origin in a petition, signed by 25,000 people and presented to the emir more than two years ago, asking for a return to the democracy that the island had briefly experienced in the mid-1970s. The regime responded by deporting the ringleaders. Western powers looked on benignly: Bahrain is the regional headquarters of America's Fifth Fleet. But protest and repression intensified, leading to violence on both sides..."

March 1997: The Al-Khalifa Accuse Thirty-Six Youths

1 March: UPI news agency reported "Bahraini firefighters foiled a bomb attack on government buildings Saturday, shortly before a series of subversion trials began in the capital, the German press agency DPA said. Firefighters dousing a burning car parked between the ministries of justice and finance in Manama found the vehicle contained a gas canister and a timing device, a government official told the agency. Minutes later the first two trials in a series of prosecutions against a total of 59 persons charged with subversion started in the State Security Court. The judges adjourned the cases for two weeks to give the defense more time for preparation. The seven defendants were accused of collaborating with a foreign country with the aim of carrying out hostile acts against Bahrain".

2 March: The brutal Al-Khalifa mercenaries, headed by the British Ian Henderson, tortured the children that were arrested last month severely. One of the children, the 9-year old Zuhair Mahdi from Daih is now in Salmanya Hospital (since 27 February) with injured face and broken teeth. Two explosions were reported in the capital, Manama: one near the National Bank of Bahrain in Nuaim and one near Sheikh Abdulla Road.

3 March: The foreign security forces attacked mosques in Markh and Bani Jamra smashing book cases that contained copies of the holy Quran. Abo-Ali mosque near Sanabis was also stormed and ransacked. In Daih, the security forces attacked and arbitrarily arrested several people from the street. Similarly in Duraz, Sanabis, Karzakk and Sitra, the foreign forces arrested many people in an attempt to frighten the citizens from going out on the street.

4 March: Abdul Amir Jaffer Isa from Sanabis has completed his two years sentence only to be told that unless he pays an arbitrary fine of 17,000 dinars (\$45,390) or else he would not be released from jail. This was never imposed by the security court, but the officer arbitrarily imposed the fine. Isa Hassan Madan, 22, detained in July 1995. His family raised his case in a civil court that found him not guilty on 19 February 1997. However, the security officers refused to release him. Sheikh Saeed Al-Salatah, 32, was arrested in Saudi Arabia 3 weeks ago and it is believed that he had been handed over to the torturers in Bahrain.

5 March: A female student from Sanabis, Arafat Abbas Radhi, 21, was expelled from the university last week in line with the discriminatory policy being implemented by the military officer Mohammed Jasim Al-Ghatam.

6 March: A sound-explosion was reported near "Bahrain Phoenicia Hotel". The past days have witnessed similar types of events, but the authorities were keen to enforce the iron-curtain and display a fictitious calm.

John Gunnell, Labour MP in the British Parliament wrote a letter to the Amir on 6 March protesting against the arrest of the 40-year old poet and writer Ali Hassan Yousef. Mr. Gunnell said "I would appreciate it if you could give me some clarification of the legal basis for his arrest".

The distribution of power amongst senior members of the ruling family was formalized on 6 March by the reformation of the "High Defence Council" that now includes the prime

minister, the crown prince, the foreign minister, the interior minister, the defence minister, the finance minister, the information minister, the head of National Guard and deputy of chief of defence force. Only two of the members are not from the Al-Khalifa family, the finance and information minister. Both are close to the prime minister.

7 March: Moody, the international credit rating agency published its Outlook stating "Bahrain's limited resource base reduces the government's ability to reverse chronic fiscal and current account deficits, and promote economic growth and job creation. These constraints, along with the political risk posed by the sectarian division in the country, make Moody's Baa rating appropriate". This is sad for the country which could have been rated to a better level had the government behaved rationally towards the civilized demands of the nation.

8 March: The 81 people chosen by the interior ministry for victimization have been accused of membership of a military wing of a 'Hizbollah'. The buzz-words used by the ruling establishment were carefully selected to woo the US and the West into supporting the oppression of Bahrainis. The presumed involvement of the two top persons Ali Al-Motgawwi and Jasim Al-Khayyat hinges on a meeting held on 10 June 1995 that was chaired by an "Iranian intelligence officer" named Mohammed Redha Al-Sadiq. It is now documented beyond any doubt that the said person died on 9 July 1994, one year before the meeting that established the military training and operations. Moreover, the said person is a religious man and poet (some of his work is published) and his death was reported by the local papers in Iran. He was non-existent to be able to lead any military operation.

9 March: Sheikh Hussain Al-Saem, 28, a religious scholar arrested last month following the deliverance of a speech calling for the release of jailed leaders and citizens, has been transferred to hospital suffering from the routine torture and ill-treatment. On the other hand, the 60-year old Sheikh Mohammed Ali Al-Ekri was re-arrested on 9 March following a speech he delivered in Ain al-Dar village, in which he called for the release of political prisoners and return of forcible exiles.

11 March: The Bahrain Freedom Movement, Popular Front in Bahrain and the National Liberation Front of Bahrain issued a joint statement condemning the Al-Khalifa's approach to handling the political crisis. They called for ending the crisis by entering into dialogue with the Committee for Popular Petition.

13 March: A group of Bahraini forcible exiles in London held a picket in front of the Bahraini Embassy denouncing the state security courts and calling for an end to the victimization of Bahrainis and the expelling of the British officer Ian Henderson who has engineered repression for the past 31 years in the service of dictatorship.

A meeting organized on 13 March (evening) by the Council for Arab and British Understanding (CAABU) and the Arab Club in London was addressed by Foreign Office minister Jeremy Hanley, and his Labour and Liberal Democrat counterparts, Derek Fatchet and Menzis Campbell. The speakers concentrated on the

issues of peace, democracy and human rights in the Middle East. Derek Fatchet, the Labour shadow minister stated that he had been concerned about the situation of human rights in Bahrain, that he raised the issue with Mr. Hanley on a continuous basis, and that the latter assured him that he had raised the various issues of concern with the Bahraini authorities. The Bahraini embassy staff were present but could do nothing in front of a large audience of politicians and personalities.

14 March: On Friday noon (14 March), the foreign forces surrounded Al-Sadiq Mosque in Fafool in an attempt to prevent people from praying. The residents of Daih went out on the streets and clashed with some members of the security forces. The latter deployed trained police-dogs to intimidate the citizens. On the same night and starting from 7.30 pm, the residents of Bilad al-Qadim switched-off the lights and closed all shops in preparation for the coming period.

16 March: Sheikh Isa Ahmad Qassim, the leading religious scholar and member of both the Constituent and the dissolved National Assemblies, issued a statement warning the government of the grave consequences emanating from the policy of victimizing the citizens of Bahrain through the passing of political sentences. He said "the killing (in its various and pre-determined forms) by the government of Bahrain has reached extravagance. The government is legitimizing for itself the shedding of blood.... These days the State Security Court is threatening to pass death and life sentences against a large number of people. It based its evidence on incompatible confessions that are full of lies and which have been extracted under torture... I advise the government to reflect before passing the sentences and before taking these decisions.... For the government must know that threatening to kill means that it has called upon the believers to put-on their coffin-cloths in preparedness for the defence of honour... To God we refer and upon Him we depend, for He is the Protector of those without protection".

16 March, a group of security men surrounded a shop in Aail and then set it ablaze at around 2.00 am.

17 March, at night: Check points were established near Al-Hid prison where more than 450 teenagers and youths are being tortured and ill-treated. About a hundred riot police were put on high alert around the area of the prison. News have been coming out that the prisoners are protesting against the notorious torturer Nader Al-Dowsari and Isa Al-Mahmeed.

An elderly person from Daih, Ibrahim Helal, 65 years old, was sentenced to six months. The respected gentleman was detained last year for ten days and both his house and shop were raided by the foreign forces. The latter stole six thousand dinars (around \$16,000) during their raids.

19 March: In Jed-Ali, a shop was burned by the security forces and when the residents called in the fire brigade, the latter refused to extinguish the fire. At around 2.00 pm, the Traffic Directorate building near Aail, was evacuated and fire brigades were deployed following the discovery of two sound-bombs inside building.

20 March: Mr. Stan Newens, Member of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs and Human Rights Committees, issued an appeal on 20

of Attempting to Topple the Government by Force!

March expressing his "deep concern at news received from Amnesty International concerning the trials of eighty one people, twenty two of them in their absence, by the State Security Court. .. Denial of access and facilities to the defence, the secret conduct of the trial, allegations of intimidation and torture and an apparent reliance on "confessions", allegedly extracted under duress, are at variance with all internationally accepted norms of justice and can only give rise to the gravest concern on the part of international public opinion". Mr. Newsen urged the Amir "to abandon both the present and any future proceedings employing the discredited mechanism of the State Security Court, the use of which does nothing to enhance the reputation of your country abroad".

Mr. Salem Azzam, Secretary General of the Islamic Council in the UK issued a similar appeal on 19 March urging the Amir "to have them [the 81 persons] tried in civil court with proper legal support for the accused. This is a basic human right of every citizen. If this is not possible, the defendants to be released immediately". The World Ahl Ul-Bayt Islamic League issued a statement on 20 March advising the government of Bahrain to behave in a civilized manner and to stop victimizing a large section of Bahrain society for political expediency. The statement said "the present trials are without any value. The trials must be open, just and must be attended by neutral observers... Let's adopt dialogue for solving problems.. If the present subjugation doesn't stop, then the Shia community are entitled to honourably defend themselves against such gross oppression".

21 March: Hundreds of citizens marched through the streets of al-Qafool demanding an end to the unfair trial of 81 Bahrainis. The protesters chanted "There is no such party (Hizbollah), release the prisoners". The citizens encountered the foreign forces near Al-Zahra mosque towards the end of the march. In Karbabad, the citizens went out in a similar demonstration demanding an end to the terror of the foreign forces.

23 March: The uprising inside Hidd (Dry Dock) prison came to an end following the removal of two torturers (Nader Al-Dowseri and Isa Al-Mahmeed) from the administration of the prison. The uprising started last week when the torturer Isa Al-Mahmeed ill-treated and tortured the prisoner Hassan Al-Jufeiir (who is held in solitary confinement) in front of all other prisoners. This led to the outbreak of the uprising by the prisoners. A meeting was held between a representative of the interior ministry (Duajj Al-Khalifa) and a representative of the prisoners (Ali Al-Ashiri) during which it was agreed to end the uprising after the removal from the prison of the two notorious torturers.

24 March: The Hooraa Cemetery in Manama was besieged to prevent people from gathering around the graves of the martyrs who had been forcibly buried by the foreign forces over the past two years. The mercenary forces were seen around the graves of Isa Qambar, Hassan Taher, Fadhil Abbas Marhoon and Ali Taher. There are fears that the graves may have been desecrated. Check points were established by the foreign forces in critical locations.

25 March: 25 March, Amnesty International

issued an urgent action demanding the "release of Sayyid Jalal Sayyid Alawi Sayyid Sharaf, [arrested on 6 March] who was reportedly tortured while held incommunicado by Bahraini intelligence officials. There are fears that he may be subjected to further torture".

25 March: Responding to the call by the opposition, lights were switched-off starting from 7.00 pm around the country with virtually total darkness in all uprising areas. Horns of cars were sounded declaring the start of the 3-day protests to commemorate the first anniversary of the political murder of Isa Qambar. The people are demanding that the torturers and killers of their sons and daughters be put on trial.

Students at the university of Bahrain were surrounded by security forces to prevent any movement. Students at the Bahrain Training Institute marched and raised the pro-democracy demands. Many schools around the country witnessed similar actions with the students raising placards and slogans demanding an end to the terror of the foreign forces and a halt of political trials. Shops alongside Budaya and other highways, as well as those in uprising towns and villages, were closed down. Loud explosions and columns of fire were also seen in many places.

26 March: On the first anniversary of the political murder of Isa Qambar, members of the al-Khalifa family entered into another political adventure by arbitrarily sentencing the following fifteen people: Sheikh Ali Ahmad Kadhim Al-Mutggawwi, 15 years and a fine of 7000 dinar (\$18,690); Sheikh Jasim Hassan Mansoor Al-Khayyat, 12 years and a fine of 5000 dinar (\$13,350); Ahmad Mahdi Salman Al-Maqabi, 8 years; Khalil Ibrahim Isa Al-Hayki, 8 years; Abdul Amir Ahmad Ali Abdulla, 7 years; Seyed Hussain Isa Salim, 5 years; Jaffer Hassan Ali Ahmad Sahwan, 5 years; Ghazi Redha Abed Ghazwan, 5 years; Abdul Zahra Ahmad Khalifa Salman, 5 years; Saeed Salman Abd Ali Abdul Nabi, 5 years; Aqil Makki Madan Makki, 5 years; Mohammed Jasim Mohammed Al-Hayki, 5 years; Hassan Ali Radhi Abdal Rasool, 5 years; Sami Abdulla Hassan Bu Hamad, 3 years and a fine of 500 dinar (\$1,335); Fakhri Abdulla Rashid Khalil, 3 years and a fine of 500 dinar (\$1,335)

The court "acquitted" each of Muhammad Husayn Ali Husayn Qambar, Ahmad Abd al-Hasan Ahmad al-Satravi, Muhammad Ja'far Muhsin al-Qaydum, Husayn Kazim Sa'd Hashim al-Musawi, Jabir Ali Husayn al-Shu'la, Husayn Hasan Ahmad Ali, Yusuf Mansur Jasim al-Sammak, Riyad Hasan Mahdi Muhammad, Kazim Ali Rida Hashim, Muhsin Ja'far Mirza al-Arabi, and Nadir Abd al-Nabil Marhun Jasim al-Sari.

A state of high alert dominated the country with the citizens embarking on various forms of civil resistance. In Manama, security forces were extensively deployed and the security helicopters flew low over the residential areas in such places as Bilad al-Qadim, Isa Town (over the university campus), Adleya, Sanabis, Sitra, Markh, Nuwaidrat, etc. Check points were also established around the market in Manama, Bahrain University gates as well as other strategic places. Many schools witnessed absenteeism of more than 95%. Gas cylinders exploded around the country, from Sanabis to Duraz, from Bani Jamra to Aali, Karzakkan and beyond, in Bilad al-

Qadim, in Sitra as well as other areas. Lights were switched off at nights and shops were closed down. Women demonstrated in Sitra on the anniversary of the political murder of Isa Qambar. The foreign mercenaries attacked the women and arrested several of them including: Layla Abdul Nabi Rabea, 16, Amal Ahmad Rabea, 19, Ahlam Al-Sayyed Mahdi, 18, Maryam Ahmad, 19 and others. Similarly, a women demonstration in Ekr was attacked and five women were taken prisoners.

In Barbar (26 March), a women demonstration in mid-day was attacked by the security forces. Later in the evening the youths went out in another demonstration defying the foreign forces. In Sitra, the security forces attacked private cars and properties and sprayed them with live bullets. A mini-bus belonging to the Al-Jesr Transport Establishment was damaged by the live bullets. When the owner contacted the traffic police, the latter registered the case against an "unknown party".

In Kuwait, several Bahrainis were arrested on 26 March at 10.30 pm (local time). An armed group attacked two flats in Hawally area and arrested the Bahraini citizens: Adel Al-Haiky, Ali Al-Haiky, Hussain Al-Haiky (three brothers), Mohamed Mirza, Jalil Al-Shaikh, Shaikh A. Nabi Sitrawy, Mohamed Al-Haiky, Isa Al-Haiky and Rashid Abdulla Jassim. During the attack, the police had damaged every thing in the flats such as TV, video, refrigerator, etc. Earlier on, two other Bahrainis were reported to have been detained (Sayed Hussain and Naser). No one knows why these Bahrainis were arrested. The Kuwaiti government had in the past handed over Bahrainis working in Kuwait to the Bahraini government.

27 March: The Gold Market closed down on the evening in solidarity with the people. A woman demonstration on 28 March (evening) was attacked with rubber bullets and tear gas.

29 March: The al-Khalifa court held its session on Saturday (29th March) and handed down sentences on the second batch of four groups of the 59 victims-Bahrain. The sentences delivered on Saturday ranged from seven to three years. Each of Abbas Yusuf Ibrahim Muhammad Ali Siba, Husayn Yusuf Ibrahim Muhammad Ali Siba, Isa Abd al-Nabi Siba Kadhim, Ghazi Abd al-Hassan Ibrahim Khalil, Habib Abd al-Aziz Isma'il Ali, and Anwar Abdulla Ali Ahmad al-Tashani received a 7-year jail term.

Each of Mahmud Abd al-Rasul Ali Ahmad al-Halal, Abd al-Karim Habib Mansur Muhammad, Husayn Ali Hassan Mahdi Khalaf, Ja'far Hassan Mansahdi, Ali Hassan Mahdi Khalaf, Jasim Muhsin Ashur Muhsin, Jabir Hassan Abdulla Muhammad Habil, Abd Ali Abbas Ramadan Hassan, Abd al-Ghani Ja'far Sabah, and Jamil Ali Salman al-Aqifa received a 5-year jail term. The court also decided to imprison for three years each Husayn Ahmad al-Mudayfi, Sayyid Abbas Kadhim Hassan, Jamil Mirza Ali Abd al-Nabi, Ali Hassan Jasim Ahmad, and Ahmad Ibrahim Alawi Hashim. The court "acquitted" each of Husayn Muhammad Ali al-Bana'a, Ukayl Ali Abdulla al-Wasti, Husayn Mansur Husayn Ahmad Nasir, Husayn Ahmad Kurban Ali, Ja'd Sadiq, Thamir Qasim Hassan Abd al-Rasul, Muham Husayn Kazim al-Tallaq, and Habib Za'ir Ali Dashti.

Press Conference in London on the Political Crisis in Bahrain: Pre-trial and trial procedures are illegal and invalid

The UK Parliamentary Human Rights Group (PHRG) held a press conference in the British Parliament on 26 March to draw the attention to the unfair trials in Bahrain. Lord Avebury, the Chairman of the PHRG stated "the sentencing today coincides with the first anniversary of the execution of Isa Qambar, the case which Amnesty International considered to contravene the UN Conventions, since the court based its judgment on confessions extracted under torture. The judicial system is widely condemned as unjust. The [UK] Foreign Office is not uttering a word of criticism when it comes to Bahrain.

The State Security Court that passed sentences is presided by a member of the ruling Al-Khalifa family. This is meant to intimidate the population, whose political leaders, like Sheikh Al-Jamri, have been jailed. Such a treatment has created spontaneous disorder with loud explosions and unrest reported on daily basis. Britain must play an active and constructive role. The responsible minister does not see a need for change, while at the same time calls for pluralism and democracy in other countries. In the case of Nigeria, Nigerian ministers have been prevented from visiting Europe and an embargo was imposed on the supply of military equipment. While at the same time we receive the Bahraini crown prince to discuss possible sales of arms. There is a lobby [defending the Bahraini government] in the [British] parliament comprising of MPs such as William Powell, David Mellor and Oglia Maitland. These will be called by their constituent to answer for the reasons behind supporting a regime that negates everything that we stand for".

Hanya Al-Mufti of Amnesty International said "For many years, we have been saying that we regard the trials in Bahrain as unfair. Yet, the trials are still continuing and there seems to be no change in practice and process. What should be mentioned is that, long before an accused person reaches the court, his rights have already been violated. The person is firstly arrested without a warrant and put in incommunicado detention without any access to family, lawyers or medical doctors. Interrogation and torture during the first days and weeks continue until the accused accepts to confess before an investigating judge. Then comes the referral to the State Security Court (SSC). The lawyer will not have had access to the accused up until the short time before the start of the first session. In between the sessions, the lawyer is not allowed to meet with his defendant. During the trials, the procedure is totally unacceptable. For example there is a decree issued in 1976 that allows the SSC to avoid compliance with the penal code. The latter code in itself is sub-standard and not complying with even those minimum provisions makes the process worse. Hence, the SSC does not allow for cross-examining of witnesses or the accused. Instead, the SSC accepts written confessions as admissible evidence against the accused. Confessions constitute the basis for passing sentences. In some cases, when the accused had refused to write confessions, a police officer may submit a statement saying this and that, and such a practice would be accepted as admissible evidence.

Once a sentence is passed there is no appeal. In the case of a death sentence the court of

cassation ruled it has no jurisdiction over the SSC. For someone to be sentenced to death without having the right of appeal is completely against UN conventions. This is because even under the best system, there is a risk of error. We have gone on record to appeal to the government to halt the trials. The present trial of 81 (22 in absentia) resembles all the misgivings. They were arrested, tortured and were forced to appear before TV to confess against themselves. We understand that two of them were threatened that if they did not appear on TV they risked having their female relatives raped. The practice of showing people on TV for public spectacle takes away the presumption of innocence, which is a basic right.

We appealed to the government but received no reply. It is expected that more will be sentenced on 29 March. The entire pre-trial and trial process is flawed. We call for the re-trial of those sentenced before a court that complies with the constitution of Bahrain and with international standards. If the government of Bahrain says that their trials are fair then they should have no objection to the presence of Amnesty International observers during the sessions. In the last two years no less than 300 people have been unfairly sentenced and there are at present between 1000-1500 political prisoners".

The Arab Organization for Human Rights (AOHR) distributed a statement in the Press Conference saying "News agencies revealed that the Bahraini authorities sentenced 15 people accused of involvement in an alleged plot to topple the government to prison terms ranging from three to 15 years and 11 acquitted. Two defendants were also fined 7,000 and 5,000 dinars respectively. Two other suspects received eight years in prison, one suspect received seven years, eight got five years and two three years. The last two were also fined 500 dinars each. The trial of 81 suspects (22 of them in absentia) began on 1 March. The security courts do not allow for the right of appeal and the procedures contravene the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We understand that 20 lawyers were summoned and warned against divulging information about the trials. However the AOHR is aware of the fact the accused are sentenced on the bases of confessions, allegedly extracted under torture. We call on the government of Bahrain to halt any further trials and to resort to dialogue for resolving the political crisis and for establishing civil peace".

Earlier on 17 March, Amnesty International had issued a major press statement calling for an immediate halt to the trials saying: "The Bahraini authorities should act now to step the unfair State Security Court trials of 59 defendants accused of involvement in an alleged Iranian-backed plot to overthrow the government, Amnesty International said today, as the verdicts of the first trial are expected shortly. These trials have been grossly unfair at all stages, and none of the defendants will have the right to appeal before a higher court. This is particularly alarming since if convicted, some of the defendants could face the death penalty. Irrespective of the charges against them, the accused are entitled to fair and public trial in line with international standards. A total of 81 people have been charged in this case but only 59 of them have appeared in court. The

remainder are believed to be still at large, and the government announced that they would be tried *absentia*. Most of the sessions of the trials which began on 1 March have been held in camera at the Coast Guards (Khafar al-Sawhel) base in al-Muharraq. The defendants have been divided into eight groups and are being tried separately rather than as one group. Only in the first session of each trial, which involves the reading of the charges, have relatives of the accused been permitted to attend. No independent observers are able to attend the trials.

At the end of February and early March, several of the estimated 20 defence lawyers involved in the trials were interviewed by the foreign media. Shortly thereafter, all of them were summoned by the Minister of Justice and reportedly warned that dissemination of any information about the trials would not be tolerated and that they would face consequences if they failed to comply with his directive.

This clearly shows that the government is intent on keeping a very tight lid on information pertaining to the conduct of these trials," Amnesty International said.

The main defendants in the case are charged with conspiring with a foreign state to carry out acts hostile to Bahrain under Article 122 of the penal code, an offence punishable by death. They are also charged, together with most of the other defendants, with membership of organization whose aim is to overthrow by force the "political, social or economic system of the state" under article 159 of the penal Code and which is punishable by up to life imprisonment. Some defendants also face charges relating to the illegal possession of firearms.

The Bahraini Government claimed that the defendants are members of the military wing of a prohibited organization, Hizbullah-Bahrain, Said to be based in Tehran and assisted financially and militarily by Iran. Its alleged aim is the establishment, by violent means, of an Islamic republic in Bahrain loyal to Iran. Some of the main defendants in the case are charged with having contact with intelligence officials within Iran's Revolutionary Guards and to have received military training both in Iran and in Hizbullah camps in Lebanon.

Most of the 59 defendants were arrested at various times in early 1996, and on 3 June the Bahraini Government announced that a coup plot had been uncovered. Two days later, the "confessions" of some of them were broadcast on Bahraini television. Several of the defendants had been arrested after being forcibly returned to Bahrain from United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. All of these defendants have been held incommunicado since their arrest and denied access to relatives and defence lawyers. We fear the their "confessions" may have been extracted under torture. In Bahrain, such "confessions" are routinely used as the sole basis for conviction before the State Security Court. The sister of one of the defendants and wife of another were allegedly bought before them in prison and threatened with rape if the defendants refused to participate in the televised confessions. Defence lawyers have also requested that at least three of the defendants be referred to a medical examiner, apparently in order to verify torture claims.