

BAHRAIN

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Internal and external pressures are mounting

Welcoming the British concern for human rights

The Al Khalifa government of Bahrain has suffered several setbacks last month, and is now having to face a barrage of criticisms even from her traditional friends and allies. First there was the statements of the British minister of foreign affairs, Derek Fatchett, who declared, for the first time, his concern about human rights abuses in Bahrain. His remarks have given impetus to the international human rights organisations to undertake a more serious approach to the crisis in that country. He said that he had raised the issue of human rights with the government of Bahrain. What is more worrying to the Al Khalifa is his declaration that the Bahraini opposition is "moderate with a moderate set of demands" confirming that he had had meetings with some of its members before the general elections that swept Labour to power in May.

There was a furious reaction from the Al Khalifa, and instead of heeding his advice, Ian Henderson ordered an all-out attack on peaceful demonstrations and turned the districts of Sanabis, Bilad Al Qadeem and Duraz into battle fronts between the foreign-staffed riot police and peaceful demonstrators. Furthermore, his troops ransacked houses destroying or robbing their contents. More than 100 houses were subjected to this severe form of repression. Hundreds of cars belonging to ordinary citizens were destroyed by the attackers on these areas. The official media launched an attack on the British government and hinted to the use of trade relations as a weapon against London. This further antagonised the situation, and when Mr. Fatchett went to the three GCC countries, Bahrain was not amongst them. He said he would meet Bahrain's Amir in London in early July.

This major political setback of the Al Khalifa ruling tribe was compounded by other setbacks in the region. The American defence minister, William Cohen, who toured the GCC countries in the third week of June, did not state the usual phrases of American support to the Al Khalifa in their endeavour to maintain internal security and stability of Bahrain. This led to a feeling of frustration and dismay on the part of the Al Khalifa. It is likely that the US government has now realised the futility of supporting an absolute dictatorship which seems to be unaware of modern civil society requirements.

On the other hand, the Amir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, responded to an earlier call by the hawkish crown prince of Bahrain for a unity between Bahrain and Qatar, by accepting the latter's offer on one condition: "the unity between Bahrain and Qatar

must be preceded by popular referenda", a demand that has put the ball back into the Al Khalifa court. It is hoped that such developments be enough to bring a certain sector within the Al Khalifa hierarchy to its senses and realise that political reforms are inescapable. The Qataris have made significant progress on their internal political arena, so did Kuwait, Oman, and even Saudi Arabia, leaving Bahrain as almost the only country in the Gulf to ignore the call for reforms. It is difficult to see how the Al Khalifa could salvage themselves from this quagmire, but it is not totally out of character of the Al Khalifa to expect further repression.

On the internal front, the sudden upsurge of popular activities have caught the world by surprise. This has followed a lull in the movement following the decision to engage in a slow campaign of peaceful civil resistance. The unanimity of the people of Bahrain in their demands for a serious overhaul of the system has cornered the ruling tribe that has refused to adapt to modern times. The prime minister has been in this position for the past twenty six years, and so are most of the Al Khalifa members of the cabinet. The Amir himself has now reigned for thirty six years and has thus become immobile in his thinking and actions. In 1966 the Amir (upon advice from the British) invited Ian Henderson with a notorious past in torturing guerrillas in Kenya to run the security apparatus of the ruling tribe. He was given a free hand to do whatever he likes as long as he protected the ruling tribe. It was the Amir who took the decision to suspend the constitution and end the brief experiment in democracy in the first half of the seventies. And under his rule scores of innocent civilians were either maimed or killed under torture and police brutality.

It is therefore only appropriate to demand answers to questions relating to democracy and human rights in these troubled islands. Whenever the Amir goes, freedom-loving people are duty-bound to question him on the crisis in the country and his role in the calamity surrounding Bahrain. It has become a known fact worldwide that the Bahraini opposition is one of the most moderate political groupings in the world, and their demands from the rulers who are responsible for the terror engulfing the country are confined to the reinstatement of the Constitution which is the only source of legitimacy for the ruler and his tribe.

Observers and politicians alike, are surprised by the moderate nature of the movement and demands. In the past few weeks three innocent civilians were killed by Henderson men but their killers are at large. Not a single torturer or

killer has ever been questioned about his crimes. Still the opposition have restrained their feelings and refrained from resorting to violence to avenge these deaths. The people of Bahrain deserve to be respected and supported morally and politically. They hinge their hopes on those politicians and human rights activists to express solidarity and support for their moderate demands. The Al Khalifa ruling tribe has to listen to the demands of the people, and their friends are best positioned to bring this idea closer to the minds of the Al Khalifa. The people of Bahrain will pursue their peaceful campaign through their programme of civil resistance. They are sure their just goals will ultimately materialise.

Sheikh Ali Al-Nachas is killed

The Bahraini interior ministry killed Sheikh Ali Al-Nachas, a blind person, about 50 years old, on 29 June 1997. During the morning, the well-known torturer Adel Flaifel summoned two persons and told them that Sheikh Al-Nachas is now dead.

Sheikh Ali Al-Nachas was detained in January 1996 and sentenced for one-year accused of delivering political sermons in mosques. Released in February 1997 only to be re-detained a short time later accused of delivering similar sermons in a local mosque. For the past 2-3 months he had been suffering from ill-treatment in detention. Reports spoke of his health deterioration as a result of this ill-treatment.

Two weeks ago, his house was one of the houses (in Bilad al-Qadim) ransacked by the security forces and his wife was beaten severely inside her bedroom.

The son of Sheikh Al-Nachas, Abdulla, also in jail, was released for three days during the funeral. This release was due to the presence of the ICRC. Abdulla was interviewed by the BBC Arabic Service. His statements moved the nation. He said that "all this suffering is just because we called for the restoration of the parliament". It is feared that upon his return to his cell and after the departure of the ICRC, he could be subjected to torture for his statements. Bilad al-Qadim was besieged by security helicopters and forces on the day of martyrdom. On the next day, thousands of people gathered in Bilad al-Qadim and demanded an end to government's brutality.

The information minister, Mohammed Al-Motawwa was quoted by local papers today saying, "the security forces are monitoring the movements of these (opposition) elements for repulsing all their die-hard attempts". Hence, the killing of Bahrainis.

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Collective punishment resisted

The security forces attacked a traditional procession in Sanabis on 1 June injuring scores of people. The residents marched peacefully inside Sanabis when the security forces mounted their attack deploying tear gas and rubber bullets. Eye witnesses spoke of many people of all ages falling on the ground. Scores were arrested on the spot. During that attack, the security forces deployed rubber bullets and tear gas before storming houses and damaging at least 50 private cars as part of the collective punishment policy adopted by the ruling Al-Khalifa family against the indigenous population.

Martyr Abdul Zahra

Another martyr fell on 6 June 1997. Abdul Zahra Ibrahim Abdulla, between 27 years old, was beaten by the security forces that attacked the residents of Sanabis on 1 June. Mr. Abdulla was beaten severely by the foreign forces and had been in a critical condition since June 1st.

Collective punishment continued

Clashes continued for the second day around the principal residential area of Sanabis. The 9th of June marks the third day of the martyrdom of Abdul Zahra Ibrahim Abdulla, who was beaten to death by the security forces. The mass gathering ended the commemoration by marching to the grave of the martyr and from there to the main highway. The demonstration led by citizens (men and women) of all ages demanded that those responsible for the killing of Mr. Abdulla be put on trial.

Friday, 13 June, witnessed some of the worst events this year. Following the destruction of houses in Sanabis, the security forces imposed a siege against Sanabis on Thursday 12 June. During their aggression, the mercenaries deployed rubber bullets (4" size) and steel-pellets bullets (100 off, 3mm size steel pellets in each bullet that spread in the hit body or object). Iman Saeed Al-Manami, 7-year old girl, was hit by a steel-pellets bullet and is now in hospital. Mansoor Abdul Nabi Fardan Al-Jerdabi, 20, was hit in the chest and in the eye by the steel pellets. Ali Juma had three of his ribs broken. Abdul Amir Darwish, 23, and Jasim Abdul Hussain Al-Eskafi were also hit by steel-pellets bullets. Abd Ali Jasim Isa, who had been arrested and severely tortured, was transferred to Salmaniya Hospital, Ward 11, suffering from a critical sickness.

Bilad al-Qadim was attacked on 12 June. On Friday, 13 June, the residents challenged the foreign forces by putting on coffin-cloths and going out on the streets. Security forces attacked private properties and damaged many cars as well as houses as part of the collective punishment programme. A siege was imposed and helicopters were deployed together with sporadic live ammunition. Clashes lasted between 4.00 pm till 11.00 pm (local time). At 3.30pm, (13 June) a group of foreign forces entered Duraz and started threatening the citizens that they will be punished if a procession starts. At 5.00pm, the citizens had gathered and the security forces started firing rubber bullets and tear gas. Four lorries packed with forces arrived on the scene and clashes intensified with the forces fleeing the area in the face of unarmed citizens. Helicopters were then deployed together with sporadic live ammunition.

Collective punishment started with the damaging of private cars and ransacking of houses. Budaya Highway was blocked for 2 hours until 7.00pm. Duraz remained under attack until 8.30 pm. Many people were injured and arrested, some of them in critical conditions.

The government announced that four Asians died in a mysterious fire in Manama on 13 June. Unlike the interior ministry which claims that citizens in detention die of heat attacks, the opposition denounced all acts of violence resulting in the death of people, citizens or otherwise. The opposition called for independent enquiry in all events of violence for establishing the causes and punishing the perpetrators.

On 14 June, a loud explosion shocked the Diplomatic Area at around 8.00 am of Manama. News agencies said the explosion was caused by a gas cylinder. Another explosion was reported in Manama around 7.00 pm.

Isa Qassim Statement

The senior religious figure, Sheikh Issa Qassim, member of both the Constituent and National Assemblies issued a strong statement on 16 June 1997 saying: "The deteriorating security situation and the disastrous governmental violence against the Shia community in Bahrain violated all religious, constitutional, rational and civilized limits. These are matters for concern. It must be affirmed that the Shia-Sunni brotherhood is a pillar of the society, so is the national brotherhood and common relations and interests. We must all avoid being dragged into an opposite direction to these pillars. It must also be affirmed that the uprising in Bahrain is bonded to legitimate demands and the uprising is sticking to these demands, and has no intention of toppling the regime. However, the government's flagrant aggression against the Shia community, against its men and women, against its old, young and children, against its mosques and matams (assembly halls), against its religious institutions and processions, represent a vicious attack and ferocious sectarian oppression that would destabilize the country today and tomorrow. I call on the government to retreat, and call on the clergy from both Islamic sects, as well as the intellectuals and dignitaries, to stand on a united forum for advising the government that this sloppy direction would result in nothing other than a disaster... I call on the government to go for peace, for unity and for construction. I call on the people to support each other and collect donations for compensating the losses caused by the government's aggression".

Witch-hunt by a UN official

A dangerous precedent took place at the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) office in Manama. A delegation of Bahraini citizens visited the UNDP office in Salmaniya district of Manama on 18 June to submit a letter and a videocassette addressed to the UN Secretary General, Mr. Kofi Annan. The letter was an official complaint against the atrocities of the security forces committed against the indigenous population. The videocassette contained evidence from the latest attacks against Sanabis and Bilad al-Qadim. The UNDP directed the citizens to the main UN office in Jufair, where the letter and videocassette was later delivered to the designated official.

However, the UN Resident Coordinator (a

Sudanese person by the name Faisal Abdul Qadir, 48 years) took upon his shoulder to conduct a witch-hunt for identifying the citizens for handing them over to the security authorities in Bahrain. Mr. Abdul Qadir might also have blocked the transmission of the letter and the videocassette to the UN Secretary General. He also called the Bahraini security personnel and the latter were spotted conducting searches around the offices of the UN. This is a dangerous move by a UN official with an international diplomatic status. The opposition has called on the UN Human Rights offices in New York and Geneva to intervene and investigate the alleged wrongdoing of Mr. Abdul Qadir. There are also rumours that the Bahraini authorities have promised Mr. Abdul Qadir a Bahraini citizenship for his special services. A copy of the submitted letter is available from the BFM.

A politicised job market

A delegation from the Arab Labour Union (ALU) left Bahrain on 28 May after failing to achieve any of the intended targets of the visit. The ALU had submitted an official complaint to the Arab Labour Organization against the detention and exiling of unionists in Bahrain as well as complaining against the banning of labour unions in Bahrain. The constitution of the country allows for the establishment of unions, but the government wants to replace unions with powerless workers committees. The ALU delegation, headed by Hassan Jammam, was not allowed to meet with the interior minister as had been promised. Labour policies in Bahrain are politicized in line with the semi-official sectarian policy of the Al-Khalifa government. Unemployment amongst the Shia community is politically driven. There are some 35,000-40,000 unemployed.

According to official figures (see Ashraq Al-Awsat of 8 May 1997) the total work-force in 1995 was 258,900. Only 39.3% of these were nationals (ie 101,800 citizens are in the labour market). Many influential members of the ruling Al-Khalifa family are involved in the importation of cheap labour from the Indian subcontinent. Most of these labourers are imported on a "Free-Visa" arrangement, whereby the "enslaved" labourer is dumped in the labour market for chasing any job opportunity. The importer (agent) charges a percentage of whatever income the labourer earns. According to government figures, an average of 80 Free-Visa labourers are imported every day in the country (2400 per month, 28,800 per year) from the Sub-Indian Continent to work in all types of activities. According to the same official figures, 7% of the private sector work-force (ie 2479 persons) earn salaries less than 100 dinars per month (\$267/month). There are 9 Bahraini citizens whose salaries are less than 50 dinars/month. The percentage of national labour has fallen from 43% in 1981 to 39.3% in 1995.

Housing the imported troops

It was announced on 25 June that Abu Dhabi Development Fund is to donate \$27 million to Bahrain for building a residential town to be named after the UAE President Zaid bin Sultan al-Nahayan. These were good news, had it not been for the statement of their apparent, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, who said that these would be reserved for loyal people. Such a term is clear reference to the thousands of people who

had been imported from Syria and Yemen in the past year. The Al-Khalifa imported what they consider as their Bedouin relatives, for recruitment in the so-called National Guard.

Al-Khalifa security summit

The Torturer Abdul-Aziz bin Attiyanulla Al-Khalifa was appointed as the governor of Manama on 2 June. Bahrain administration is being divided into four regions. All governors will report to the interior minister. All affairs concerning each region must pass through the governor whose remit includes maintaining security and ensuring loyalty. The governors are expected to head a sub-council of 15 mukhtars (chosen individuals). The opposition condemned the scheme as a further attempt to consolidate backward and alien tribal rituals on the civil society of Bahrain.

The heir apparent summoned an emergency meeting for the ruling family for the deployment of more foreign forces against the citizens of Bahrain. In a characteristic manner, the heir apparent published the news in the local papers on 24 June saying, "The Crown Prince and Commander in Chief of the Defence Force, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, yesterday chaired a meeting regarding strategies for the joint endeavour for national security, to ensure stability and to promote development in Bahrain". The attendants of the meeting were "the Minister of the Interior, Sheikh Mohammed bin Khalifa Al Khalifa, the Minister of Defence and Deputy Commander in Chief of the Defence Force, Lt Gen Sheikh Khalifa bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, the Commander of the National Guard, Staff Brigadier Sheikh Mohammed bin Isa Al Khalifa, Interior Undersecretary Major General Sheikh Ibrahim bin Mohammed Al Khalifa, the BDF Chief of Staff, Maj Gen Sheikh Abdullah bin Salman Al Khalifa, the Chairman of the Bahrain Centre for Studies and Research, and Defence Undersecretary Sheikh Salman bin Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, and a number of senior officers".

These names were published for spreading fear amongst the public by implying that the ruling family is poised for attack. At the same time, the local papers continued mentioning the presence of the Jordanian intelligence chief for the same purpose of spreading fear. The official Gulf News Agency reported on 22 June that the Amir, Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa "received a Jordanian security delegation led by Lt-Gen Samih al-Battikh, director of the Jordanian General Intelligence Department. During the meeting, the Amir and Battikh exchanged cordial words on brotherly relations, the latest developments in the Gulf and Arab arenas, and issues of common concern". The agency also reported that Battikh was received by the heir apparent and the prime minister.

It is worth noting that on 6 November 1996, GNA also reported that "Prince Abdullah Bin Husain, commander of the Special Operations of the Jordanian armed forces left Manama this afternoon. During his visit to Bahrain, Prince Abdullah attended a tactical exercise conducted jointly by the Special Force Unit of the Bahrain Defence Force and the Special Forces of the Jordanian armed forces...". Earlier on 18 August 1996, the son of the heir apparent (also the under-secretary in the Defence Ministry) ended a visit to Jordan.

The idea of using Jordanians for internal

oppression dates back to 1984 and was floated in 1984 during a meeting in Washington between then US President Reagan, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordanian King Hussein. Since then, it has always been flagged whenever the Al-Khalifa rulers realised that they are in no way near to silencing the nation.

The use of Jordanians intelligence officers is in itself an old practice with many senior torturers already in Bahrain. No amount of foreign security help can force the people to their knees. The Al-Khalifa have already used their foreign security agents, such as Henderson, Akkari, Affoni (both Jordanians), Yemeni and Pakistani torturers against our people to no avail. The opposition believes that the people of Bahrain can not be wiped out from their lands and the movement for restoration of basic rights could not be stopped. A statement by the BFM directed to the enlightened members of the ruling family said, "It is time for realising that the Bahraini society can only be governed properly through the constitution of the country. If the present attitude continues, then calamity is the end result. The rulers and the ruled might also be heading for non-retrievable situation, unless the present policy is brought to a halt".

Unity with Qatar, please!

On 17 June 1997, the Amir of Qatar in a press conference with Qatari papers (see Al-Hayat of 17 June) responded to the call made by Bahrain's crown prince for unity with Bahrain saying: "The call for unity comes from a clean heart. However, the issue in Qatar, is that we must submit this call for the people to vote on it, because such a matter must come from the hearts of the people, instead of leaders who might be on good or bad terms from one day to another".

The Bahrain Freedom Movement, Popular Front in Bahrain and the National Liberation Front had issued a joint statement on 31 May stating: "The ruling family is attempting to divert attention from the demands of the constitutional movement by imagining a fictitious environment of economic gains and by talking about "breakthrough-solution" for the border dispute with Qatar. While we hope that the government succeed in solving the dispute with Qatar, we also hope that the ruling family starts to wake-up to the inevitable changes taking place in today's world. Elections and democracy are sweeping the world and are reaching the Gulf. We believe that there is no real exit to the crisis except through the establishment of serious dialogue with the Committee for Popular Petition (CPP). We are committed in our constitutional approach that is bound by national unity and consensus and we call upon all sections of the society to mobilize their peaceful activities for the democratic future of Bahrain, as outlined in the popular petition that was signed by 25,000 citizens".

A totally rejected council

Confidential reports indicated that justice minister has started appointing persons for the religiously rejected "High Council for Islamic Affairs" intended for taking-over religious institutions. A person by the name "Mohammed Baqer bin Sheikh Sa'eed Al-Mubarak" is believed to have been appointed for one of the positions. The affected people have already declared a policy of total rejection and boycott.

On 22 June, the interior ministry issued orders to leaders of mosques and assembly halls (matams) for switching-off microphones during the forthcoming religious programmes. Such arbitrary orders are designed for intimidating the citizens.

No Human Rights in Bahrain

Amnesty International (AI) and Arab Organization for Human Rights (AOHR) issued their annual reports in the past few days with Bahrain's government scoring some of the worst offences and abuse of human rights. AI said "several hundred people, among them prisoners of conscience were arrested in connection with demonstrations demanding the restoration of democratic rights. Most were held incommunicado for months without charges or trial. At least 150 people (in the past year) received unfair trials before the State Security Court. Torture was widely reported, and an increasing number of women and children were ill-treated. At least one person died in custody, apparently as a result of torture, and four people were reportedly shot or beaten to death by members of the security forces. Three people were sentenced to death and one person was executed, the first execution in nearly 20 years. Bahraini nationals suspected of opposition political activities continued to be banned from entering the country...". The AOHR pointed out that some 500 Bahrainis remained forcibly exiled, while torture and unfair trials before the State Security Court continued.

Citizens in security courts

On 28 June, a security court headed by a member of the ruling family sentenced 16 citizens. The unconstitutional court divided the citizens into two groups, 10 and 6. The group of 10 was sentenced between 1-5 years together, with fines ranging from BD 300-800 (\$800-2,136). The group of 6 was sentenced between 2-3 years. The sentences of this court are all considered null and void by the Bahraini constitution as well as by the international human rights organizations. The opposition calls for the release of all political prisoners and detainees, especially those sentenced by this feudal court.

On 18 June, the medieval security court sentenced seven citizens for terms up to five and half years, as follows: Iskandar Ahmad Suleiman 5 years, 6 months; Hussain Ali Ahmad al-Satarwah, 2 years; Ali Hassan Ali Abdulla Al-Ramel, 2 years; Abdul Hadi Saleh Ibrahim, year; Khalil Jaber Fardan Isa, 1 year; S. Abbas Habib Ahmad, 2 years; Saeed Ali Hassan Khalaf, 1 year, 6 months. An eighth person, Mohammed Hassan Ali Al-Ramel, who is inside the country, was also named by the but not sentenced.

Reuters reported on 14 June that a security court convicted six citizens "of possessing unlawful leaflets, but said the men should be free because they had already spent 14 months in jail, a lawyer said". The court found the guilty but (found) that the period they had spent in jail was enough, the lawyer told Reuters. The six defendants were also fined 200 dir (\$531) each, he said. The six Bahrainis - imprisoned since their arrest in April 1996 - Hassan Qassab, Shaker al-Mahouzi, Mirza Qatari, Saleh Hassan, Ali Isa Ahmed and Huss Howaida".

Bahraini government launched media attacks against Derek Fatchett

Fatchett: A moderate opposition with a moderate set of demands

Extracts from a report by PA New on 3 June 1997: (The Government was urged tonight to denounce a British citizen described in the Commons as "the Butcher of Bahrain".

The call came from Labour's George Galloway (Glasgow Kelvin) as he launched a short late-night debate on Britain's policy towards Bahrain. Mr Galloway, who attacked the human rights record of the ruling regime on the Gulf island group, said the figure "at the very heart of the darkness" there was a Scotsman called Colonel Ian Henderson. "He is known in the Gulf as 'the Butcher of Bahrain'. He is head of the security services and director of intelligence, and he has gathered around him the kind of British dogs of war -- mercenaries -- whose guns and electric shock equipment are for hire to anyone who will pay the price."

It had been commonplace for Tory ministers in the previous Government to claim they had no responsibility for the actions of a British citizen abroad like Ian Henderson, said Mr Galloway. "But I don't believe that is true. After all, this House rightly made it possible to pursue and punish British sex tourists who pollute the Philippines and Thailand with their paedophile proclivities. How much more, then, have we a responsibility to similarly pursue people who torture and murder for money and who carry our passports." Dubbing Ian Henderson "Britain's Klaus Barbie", Mr Galloway declared: "The Government has a clear duty to repudiate the conduct of one of our citizens in the service of a foreign power who stands condemned of crimes against humanity".)

UK Government Response - The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Mr. Derek Fatchett:

"I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member of Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway) on introducing this short but important debate on human rights and the specific question of Bahrain... I remind my hon. Friend that in his speech on 12 May right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made it clear that this Government value an ethical dimension in their foreign policy and that we shall give substantial priority to human rights and try to pursue that agenda through international forums bilateral relationships and other means available to us.

In relation specifically to Bahrain, I have already had the opportunity to meet the Bahraini ambassador. My hon. Friend referred to one or two items already in my diary and I suspect that he may have some predictions for future meetings. I took the opportunity of that meeting to raise our concern about human rights. I stressed a number of issues. Our discussion was frank and the atmosphere was one in which it was possible for me to engage in a constructive dialogue, which I was keen to do.

I welcomed recent visits to Bahrain by representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross, but I also strongly emphasised to the Bahraini ambassador that transparency in human rights is crucial. I emphasised the need for Amnesty International or any similar organisation to be involved in monitoring the situation closely. I shall continue to take up that commitment and I have suggested to the ambassador that it might be a sensible approach for him and

his Government to get in touch with Amnesty International.

I give a clear commitment to my hon. Friend and to others who have taken a keen interest in the matter that when we feel that there is a need to address these issues with the Bahraini authorities we shall not hesitate to do so constructively. I will talk about our overall approach in relation to human rights, but I can say to my hon. Friend that our commitments are clear and our style and approach will be clear, not just on this issue, but on others as well.

Last week, when I was in the middle east, I was asked about the Government's approach to human rights. I said at that stage that our approach would not be a la carte; it is a universal principle that we are trying to promote and we will promote it in each case and take each opportunity.

May I raise one issue that I thought my hon. Friend much publicity with regard to the treatment received by Sheikh Abdul Amir Al-Jamri, a senior Shia cleric and spiritual leader who has remained in detention in Bahrain since January 1996. The Government of Bahrain have always stated that allegations such as those about the lack of family visits and the sheikh's maltreatment were unfounded. In my recent meetings with the Bahraini ambassador I addressed that question. I have been assured that Al-Jamri was in good health, that there was access to medical attention whenever he needed it and that he was visited by his family on a regular basis. This is an area on which I pressed for openness and transparency because the best way for the Bahraini authorities to remove fears about Al-Jamri and others is to have independent international monitoring of the human rights regime, Amnesty International or any other organisation with a similar reputation could play a valuable part in that.

My hon. Friend raised some important specific issues and I shall try to address the six main points raised in his speech.

I can assure my hon. Friend that the asylum applications are under consideration. Naturally, they are confidential between the parties concerned. I the circumstances, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the details, but I will ensure that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is aware of the views expressed by my hon. Friend.

There was also the question of whether defence equipment exports would be used in internal repression in Bahrain. I remind the House that on 22 May my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary announced the initiation of an urgent review of the detailed criteria used in licence applications for the export of conventional weapons. New criteria will be made available to the House as soon as that review is completed. We will then look closely at any evidence that British companies within our jurisdiction may be involved in supplying materials or expertise for the purposes of torture or any other human rights violations. I give my hon. Friend that clear commitment.

That clear commitment applies also to the points that my hon. Friend made about the article in The Guardian on 13 May. He will appreciate that I am not in a position to com-

ment on the specific allegations, simply because we do not have the material on those allegations. However, if my hon. Friend or anyone else is able to provide that material, we will look into the points made. We shall certainly investigate the matter further on the basis of the article in The Guardian, I assure my hon. Friend that I shall be writing to him in the near future with our response to the points made.

My hon. Friend also raised the question of the safety of Bahraini exiles in the United Kingdom. Over the past year or so, I have had the opportunity to meet some of the Bahraini exiles and some of those leading the Bahraini opposition. I share my hon. Friend's view that those responsible for the opposition in this country are moderate people with a moderate set of demands. Therefore, we would be concerned about the safety of any individual exile. We would view with the utmost concern any suggestion of a specific threat against anyone in the United Kingdom. Where specific complaints are brought to our attention or to the attention of any hon. Member, we will investigate them further. If there is any specific evidence in that respect, we will pursue the matter. We will give the utmost priority to the safety of those in exile here.

My hon. Friend referred to the state security court. One of the points that we have already stressed and will continue to stress to the Bahraini authorities is the need for due process of law in all criminal cases. That is an important element in any human rights regime and we shall continue to make that argument. My hon. Friend referred in some detail to the case of Mr. Ian Henderson and made a number of disturbing allegations in relation to the activities of Mr. Henderson. If those allegations are true, they would be viewed with great concern and dismay by Her Majesty's Government. My hon. Friend talked about the possibility of legal action being taken against Mr. Henderson on his return. That is a matter for others. However, I wish to make it clear that action along the lines suggested in relation to Mr. Henderson. We deplore those actions if the allegations are true.

This country is entering a new period of foreign policy. Wherever I have travelled, and with whomsoever I have engaged in debate, there has been a tremendous interest in the Foreign Secretary's remark that there should be an ethical dimension to foreign policy. That involves important tactical questions about how we pursue that ethical dimension. In the vast majority of cases, we will strive for a constructive engagement. We will do that with Bahrain. Putting it crudely, there are sticks and carrots and there are difficult tactical choices to be made. We will engage with Bahrain over a range of commercial, political and regional issues. That was the policy of the previous Government and we intend to continue it. Within that as an important agenda item, there will be discussion of human rights."

Bahraini media attacked Mr. Galloway and Mr. Fatchett. The latter visited three Gulf States in June but not Bahrain. He was quoted by the BBC Arabic Service that he would be meeting the Amir of Bahrain in the first week of July in London.