

BAHRAIN

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

Reforms necessitate tackling critical issues

During the past months, the Amir of Bahrain positively responded to several key demands that had been raised by the people of Bahrain. He also undertook several steps to open up channels of dialogue with the active political forces inside and outside the country. The main steps of reforms included the following:

1. Abolishing the State Security Law and Court
2. Releasing all political detainees and prisoners
3. Allowing most exiles to return home and promising to allow the rest back as soon as possible.
4. Allowing citizens to debate political issues with greater freedom of expression than ever before.
5. Allowing citizens to form non-governmental organisations that are important for activating civil society.
6. Initiating a new process for granting public contracts that avoid corrupt practices.
7. Allocating temporary benefits for the unemployed and allowing a committee of citizens to monitor the work of the labour ministry in relation to finding jobs for the unemployed.
8. Authorising the formation of labour and women unions.
9. Lowering the fees for the university students.
10. Announcing future plans for improving the housing conditions.

The above steps created a new environment of hope in the country. Nevertheless, it is noted that there are still some negative aspects which require careful attention. These include:

1. Freedom of press is not yet achieved. The press is mainly controlled by an elite that has not yet identified itself with the reforms. There are many

restrictions on freedom of expression that must be removed to enable Bahrainis to fully express themselves within the bounds of the Constitution.

2. There is a lack of transparency in relation to a programme aimed at changing the demography of Bahrain. The people of Bahrain continue to express their concern in relation to the granting of passports to large number of imported people.

3. Bahrain is going through a transitional period, and this period lacks any popularly accepted mechanisms for monitoring the situation.

4. Bahrainis are yet to be treated as equals in relation to employment in several key sectors, such as employment in the interior and defence ministries.

Bahrainis are striving to play an active part in an open, plural and constitutional political process. An integral part of such participation is to point out the areas of democratic deficit, so that a brighter future for Bahrain can be secured.

All opposition forces are examining the best approach for effective participation in the political process. Ideally, this is to be through allowing political parties to peacefully and publicly organise themselves inside Bahrain. At present, it seems the reform programme is falling short of this demand. Nevertheless, it is necessary for all political forces to form themselves within the present laws, until they are amended. Presently, each tendency would have to form a non-governmental organization to represent it and enable it to present its political programme before the people.

The BFM believes that all forces in the society ought to come together to solve the problem of unemployment. The 25 million dinars allocated for six

months by the government to distribute benefits will run out next November. It is forecast that only 3000 – 4000 citizens would join the work force while 6000 – 7000 of them who had registered will still be looking for work. Total unemployed is estimated to be over 20,000. There are 6000 – 7000 others who are expected to start looking for work next year. Already slogans started to appear on the walls warning of a time bomb waiting to explode as a result of the failure to employ Bahrainis.

It is important for the political leadership, primarily the Amir, and the opposition to establish understanding on several key issues so that the potential problems are resolved before going out of hand. In addition to the problem of unemployment, there are suspicions that an ill-intentioned programme for changing the demography of Bahrain is continuing.

The government ought to open up and allow popularly accepted bodies to act as watchdogs during the transitional period up until the election of the parliament. The example of the "Committee to Assist the Jobless" is a good one. This committee was given the authority (by the Amir) to observe and monitor all actions being implemented by the ministry of labour with regard to the jobless. More of the same sort is needed to monitor the situation with regard to other critical issues.

Another issue that continues to boil is how will the government deal with those who had tortured and ill-treated thousands of citizens in the past three decades. It is not acceptable to leave these types of people in their positions without questioning and disciplinary action. The Amir could issue a pardon for them, but only after they are made to answer for the crimes they committed against the nation.

Women's union given the go-ahead

Another reform step was announced on 28 June relating to a permission to form a new union grouping women's societies in Bahrain. This will be the second union to be approved "on principle" by the government. It follows a recent pledge made by the Amir to allow the formation of a long-awaited labour union. The demand for the formation of unions was first raised by Bahrainis in 1938.

In Support of Torture Victims

Bahrain has become this year one of the first countries to celebrate the 26th June, the UN International Day in Support of Torture Victims. The Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS) organised a series of activities including a seminar on 26 June. A key contribution was a speech delivered on behalf of the Amir in which he supported the UN day and reaffirmed his support for human rights. Earlier, on Friday 22 June, Sheikh Al-Jamri called for celebrating the UN day all over Bahrain so that the black era which Bahrain went through for the past three decades may not return.

A seminar, organised in Ma'amir on 27 June, was addressed by Seyyed Dhia Al-Mosawi, who explained the convergence of all cultures with regards to the concepts of human rights and combating all forms of torture and ill-treatment.

The International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims said "Every government, which has to date failed to ratify the UN Convention against Torture, is today being urged to say no to torture. As part of a global appeal for the universal ratification of the UN Convention against Torture, which remains the least ratified of the six core human rights treaties, a total of 156 Governments worldwide are being urged to make a commitment to end torture. The International Rehabilitation Council conducts the global appeal for Torture Victims (IRCT) on behalf of the Coalition of International NGOs against Torture.

Tuesday, June 26 is the UN International Day in Support of Torture Victims. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mrs. Mary Robinson, will today launch the Global Appeal to urge all world governments to ratify and adhere to the UN Convention against Torture in a New York event that spearheads the global "Together against Torture" campaign.

No government is publicly in favour of Torture. It is difficult to combat torture, because it mostly takes place clandestinely and in spite of public denial. But on 26 June 2001, the IRCT will expose the horror of torture. Last Friday the Bahrain Human Rights Society raised questions about torture and its victims together with religious leaders in lectures normally delivered before Friday's prayer. They have prepared for the events that take place in Bahrain

today on June 26, the UN International Day in Support of Torture Victims.

The Friday prayer in Bahrain was only the beginning of more than 250 events against torture being held on June 26, 2001.

Unemployment

In a move to curb the large number of illegal foreign workers, the government announced a six-month grace period to legalise their stay. There are more than 200,000 foreign workers in Bahrain, while at the same time there are more than 20,000 citizens searching for work without luck. The problem in Bahrain is compounded because the government has not yet lifted its ban on certain sections of Bahrain society in relation to employment in certain sectors, such as defence.

The Associated Press said "Bahrain has given six months to illegal workers to leave the country or legalize their stay before a new labor regulation comes into force later this year, the labor minister said Monday. "The government has already approved a series of procedures to help the illegal workers easily legalize their stay," Labor Minister Abdulnabi al-Sho'la told The Associated Press.

The new labor regulation will enable foreign workers to stop relying on their Bahraini employers who often take advantage of them by paying for their travel and work permit, then leave them without regular pay, forcing many of them to look for a second job illegally, al-Sho'la said. Most of the estimated 50,000 illegal workers are believed to be Indians, who number more than 100,000 in Bahrain. Other illegal workers come from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Philippines. Millions of unskilled Asian workers have been drawn to Bahrain and other oil-rich Gulf states by jobs in the construction, factories, restaurants and households. On arrival, most workers are forced to turn their passports over to their Bahraini sponsors, many of whom never pay them or renew their work permits. To switch jobs, all foreign workers need a written release letter from their employers, even after they have completed their contract. "After six months, all these practices will stop," al-Sho'ala said, adding the workers will only have to complete the period of their work contract after which they can join any other employer on a two-year contract basis. Of the country's 400,000 citizens, more than 20,000, including registered and unregistered job seekers and school dropouts, are reportedly unemployed.

Dr Al-Jamri returns after 15 years in exile

Dr Mansoor Al-Jamri returned yesterday to Bahrain ending 15 years of exile. He received a hero's welcome from the people who flocked to greet him upon his return. Upon arrival to his home village of Bani Jamra, Dr Al-Jamri addressed a large gath-

ering expressing his gratitude to the people whose "steadfastness, unity, attachment to your principles and love of the country have led to the present success". He paid tribute to the martyrs, former prisoners and human rights activists, Bahrainis and non-Bahrainis. Calling for unity, he further added "We need to reconcile our differences and resist attempts of dispersion". His return trip was initially resisted by the authorities, but had to acquiesce at the last minute. The green light to permit him to return came only hours before the scheduled flight to Bahrain. Dr. Al-Jamri thanked the Amir of Bahrain for fulfilling key aspirations of the nation.

Report on Al-Jamri's return

Courtesy: Gulf News (17 June 2001)

From Lathcef Farook

Our Bahrain Bureau Chief

Last Monday was yet another milestone in the history of Bahrain, known for its dramatic and remarkable political changes which has created the much needed sense of unity and understanding in the drive to modernize the country.

Under these waves of changes, unleashed by the Emir His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, since he announced the National Action Charter, NAC, held popular referendum, offered general amnesty and the abolition of State Security Law and the State Security Court, one after the other almost all Bahrainis who lived in exile have returned home. Some came home after more than 30 years.

The latest to return home was 39 year old Dr. Mansoor Al Jamri, the son of Shiite leader Shaikh Abdel Amir Al Jamri who led the long campaign for political reforms. Within five days of his arrival, last Monday, the Emir Sheikh Hamad, the architect of new Bahrain who is spearheading an envious campaign to usher in political, economic and social reforms, received Dr. Mansoor Al Jamri who, as the head of London based Bahrain Freedom Movement, once carried out campaign for political reforms.

On the same day Dr. Mansoor was also received by the Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa. These meetings turned out to be pinnacle in the efforts aimed at reconciliation. It was especially so in the context of the Emir Sheikh Hamad's "one family" spirit philosophy to bring the nation together as he always described people's participation as the core of all modernization programmes.

During the meeting Sheikh Hamad who reiterated Bahrain's warm welcome to all Bahrainis who return home from exile also spoke about the move towards introducing parliamentary reforms. He emphasized the importance of popular participation in the envisaged parliamentary process and highlighted the need for every citizen to make his own contribution to ensure the success of the next stage which will witness major development programmes covering all levels

besides parliamentary process.

Already a two billion dinar national housing scheme aimed at developing townships and villages to provide a decent house to every Bahraini family.

Meanwhile Dr. Mansoor who profoundly thanked Sheikh Hamad for allowing those lived in exile to return home and the initiatives for modernization said "I was very pleased with the meeting with the Emir Sheikh Hamad" "It was a very relaxed, open and frank meeting when we discussed many topics. The atmosphere was such that I felt as if I was talking to a childhood friend without any kind of inhibition whatsoever. Time and again during this meeting I also noticed his sincerity and burning desire to develop Bahrain to provide a better life to the people" said Dr. Mansoor who is glad to get the opportunity to visit the island, see for himself the changes and explore the role he could play on his own free will to make his own contribution.

"Give my salaams to the people in Sitra and feel free" was Sheikh Hamad's response when I expressed my desire to address people there. This speaks volume for his desire to be in touch with the people" said Dr. Mansoor who also brought to the notice of the Emir his observation that for the first time in 20 years the people are happy, smiling and going home without any fear of being taken to custody. He described this as new atmosphere as the greatest achievement of the recent changes and he himself didn't dream of such a pleasant environment even around January this year.

Credit should go to Sheikh Hamad and paying tribute to him for initiating these reforms Dr. Mansoor said "there is no doubt that the island is blessed with an enlightened leader and, as things are and if the same trend continues, Bahrain could become the beacon for a new model of hope for the Arab and Islamic world".

Despite all what has been achieved so far Dr. Mansoor feels "the road towards parliamentary process is a long, tough and rough one with many unexpected and inevitable pitfalls. But the journey will be made easier as Sheikh Hamad had changed the style and content of leadership and the people are always willing to rally round him. Dr. Mansoor described the task of building constitutional institutions as the biggest challenge in the next stage and highlighted the need for people to have their expectations measured properly. Because the new atmosphere, he said, is the baby just born and one should not expect it to walk or run overnight as it is a gradual and natural process.

So far the changes had help clear the atmosphere and bring the people together paving the way for national unity and a healthy environment. These changes have given hope and confidence to the people. This is the most essential prerequisite. The on going dialogue between Sunnis and Shiites is bound to bring better understanding between the two major communities

which turn is expected to consolidate national unity.

The challenges are many in the stages yet to come. But as once pointed out by Prof. Bertram S Brown, head of the three member team from human rights organization Amnesty International "this is a transition period and it is also a challenging and testing time both for the government and the people. We should not forget that Rome was not built in a day".

Citizens ill-treated

During a radio programme, a group of employees who work for the Passports & Immigration Directorate and control the flow of people over the Bahrain-Saudi Causeway, complained (on air) about the bad conditions and the way they are ordered to process the passport-stamping of people crossing the Causeway. They also requested to be treated as equals to the passports' employees in the airport. On the next day, the director of Passport Directorate, Sheikh Rashid bin Khalifa Al-Khalifa, summoned the six complaining employees and lined them up for interrogation. Then he gave them the options of writing an apology or be sacked. He threatened them that on next Saturday, he will give his final decision about their case.

Also a notorious torturer has resumed his work in defiance of the reform programme of the Amir. Mahmood Al Akkooori, a Jordanian torturer working for interior ministry, has dismissed the reforms and repeatedly told his victims that he did not recognise them. His latest victim is Hussain Ahmad Essa Al Sayegh, from Abu Saibe', who was summoned to appear at his office on 13 June for interrogation. Mr Al Sayegh was subjected to ill-treatment by Al Akkooori throughout the session. The torturer told him that he would continue the interrogation, arrest him and then convict him. It is a shame that this notorious torturer is still enjoying the protection of the system and inflicting pain on the people of Bahrain. An investigation into Al Akkooori's behaviour must start immediately. The Bahraini Human Rights Society is called upon to take immediate steps to ensure the safety of Mr Al Sayegh and hold Al Akkooori to account for his black record of human rights violations and contempt of the Amir's reforms.

On 9 June, week, Sheikh Hassan Ali Abdul Wahab, 32, from Duraz, was held at the Crossing point on the Bahrain-Saudi Causeway, and returned back because he was on the "black list". Last month, the authorities promised to remove these black lists after a delegation consisting of prominent opposition figures on a visit Kuwait was maltreated by the Kuwaiti authorities.

It has also been revealed that some elements inside the government who are opposed to the recent reforms are behind the recent media attacks on human rights organisations and personalities. One of these elements is hiding behind the name of "Yousif Ahmad" which is used to sign

articles published in Al-Ayyam for attacking prominent figures in the opposition and international personalities such as Lord Avebury who was recently denied a visa to Bahrain.

The government-controlled media has continued its censorship policies. Interviews conducted with returning exiles have not been published. An interview conducted by Al Ayyam newspaper with Flani Al Rayyes who returned recently from Denmark, has been shelved. An article by the human rights activist, Abdul Nabi El Ekri, defending another opposition figure, has also been denied publication.

U-Turn on the banning of Lord Avebury's visit

Secrecy has surrounded the reasons behind the decision by the Bahraini Government to ban the long-awaited visit by Lord Avebury, Vice-Chairman of the UK Parliamentary Human Rights Group. He had planned to fly to Bahrain today, having secured an official agreement from the Bahraini Ambassador to London. Questions are now being asked about the role of the old guards in banning the visit.

The Government has performed a U-turn with regards to the proposed visit by Lord Avebury, the vice-Chairman of the Parliamentary Human Rights Group. A letter dated 10 June from Peter Ford, the British Ambassador to Bahrain said:

"I am sorry your visit had to be postponed. I have just learned from the Foreign Minister that the visit is on again for July which is excellent news". The next day, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al Khalifa, Bahrain's Ambassador in London wrote to Lord Avebury saying "In my letter to you dated 5 June I said that I hope it would be possible for me to extend an invitation to you to visit Bahrain in the not too distant future and this was only a postponement to allow many of the developments currently underway in Bahrain, to come to fruition. I am now pleased to be in a position to be able to extend an invitation for you to visit Bahrain and I wondered if the first two weeks in July might be a convenient time".

In reply, Lord Avebury said: "I do hope that if we plan accordingly, it will be third time lucky. It is embarrassing for me to have put a lot of people to some trouble on this occasion, and I have to say that it is still not clear to me why the pace of the reform programme at the moment was an insuperable obstacle to the June visit. If leave to visit Bahrain is withheld at short notice after a press campaign against the visit which appeared to have official sanction, how are we to be sure that won't happen again?"

Deploring the government-sponsored slanderers

In a letter sent to the Bahraini ambassador in London, Lord Avebury questioned

the rationale behind the ban on his visit to Bahrain on 9 June. In the letter dated 6 June, Lord Avebury said "Thank you for your letter of June 5, in which you tell me effectively that if I went ahead with my proposed visit to Bahrain, I would be refused leave to enter your country.

As you will appreciate, this is an enormous disappointment for me. I was originally invited to visit Bahrain by your Government in 1994, and that invitation was cancelled at the last moment. Ostensibly it was postponed, but when I suggested dates in January 1995, and later in the same year, all were equally inconvenient.

Last year, in the light of the reforms announced by HH the Amir, I was encouraged to visit Bahrain and see for myself the improvements being made on human rights and good governance. You and I met three times to discuss my visit, and I was also in touch with the Minister, Brian Wilson MP, officials in the FCO, and the British Ambassador in Bahrain. (Earlier, when Peter Hain was Minister, he had encouraged me to visit Bahrain, and he would only have done so with the approval of the authorities in Manama). I notified you of the plans made for the private part of my visit by the Bahrain Society for Human Rights, and I responded to the concerns you expressed about what I might say at those meetings, acknowledging the need to keep the reform process on track.

After that we spoke on the telephone last Wednesday, and you appeared to be satisfied with the assurances I had given, but you said you would come back to me within 48 hours – to let me know, I assumed, what arrangements could be made for me to meet officials or Ministers during my visit. I did not hear from you on Friday, but the Bahrain newspapers of Saturday June 2 – the Tribune, Al Ayyam and Akhbar al-Khaleej – all carried articles referring to anonymous protests against my visit by a previously unknown organisation called Supporters of the Sunni People, and quoting an unnamed government official who said that I would not be given leave to enter Bahrain.

The anonymous organisation made scurrilous and vituperative attacks on me, all of which were prominently reported in the local media. Since your newspapers do not ordinarily publish defamatory statements, let alone gratuitous vilification of citizens of countries friendly to Bahrain, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that an orchestrated campaign of this sort could not have been mounted without high-level official approval. Yet as I said in my letter of June 2, it was difficult to reconcile these articles with your kind offer to arrange meetings with officials during my visit, and assurances given by the Amir himself to the Bahrain Society for Human Rights – who were arranging the non-official parts of my visit – that he supported their work and welcomed my visit.

May I reiterate, that I have never said anything critical about the Sunni people of

Bahrain. Several prominent Sunnis have done me the honour of calling on me from time to time when they have been here on visits from Bahrain. I could not imagine that the Ansar al-Sunna, which issued hostile and insulting attacks on me in their name, was representative. The fact that no name or address was given for this organisation, and that their letter to our Ambassador in Bahrain of May 28 was unsigned, is worthy of note as I am sure you would agree. No wonder the authors of this scurrilous and defamatory missive, and of the even more offensive 'Some recent history', prefer not to identify themselves.

I still hope that you would also join me in deploring the prominence given by the media to this sectarian body with no credentials – especially so, when none of these newspapers had published the conciliatory statement I made on May 9.

I am being asked by the media for an explanation of the sudden cancellation of my visit, and of course I will give them the reasons outlined in your letter of June 5. I must observe, however, that other visitors, including Members of both Houses of Parliament, have not been asked to wait until the reform process is complete, and if indeed this was so important, it is difficult to understand why it only cropped up at the last minute.

As you know, I applaud the reforms which have been announced by the Amir, and hope they succeed. The release of political prisoners, return of the exiles, abolition of the State Security Courts, and democratic elections for a Parliament, are precisely the demands of the Bahraini people, which I have supported over the years, and it is wonderful to see this programme being implemented. It strikes a discordant note, however, when friendly would-be observers of the process are not allowed to enter Bahrain until it is further advanced. The right to freedom of expression in Article 19 of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Bahrain has signed, includes 'freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers.....'. The proscription of my visit is a breach of this obligation, and may undermine confidence in the rest of the programme."

How the visit was banned?

The government of Bahrain confirmed that it has banned Lord Avebury from visiting Bahrain in the period 9-15 June. The confirmation of the ban came in a letter sent by the Bahraini ambassador in London to the honourable Lord on 5 June.

The same ambassador had himself wrote to Lord Avebury welcoming him to Bahrain. The Amir also said to the Bahrain Human Rights Society on 22 May that Lord Avebury could visit the country as there was "nothing to hide".

However, the government formed a bogus group called "Ansar AlSunnah" (i.e. Supporters of the Sunni People) and this

group issued two slanderous statements against Lord Avebury. This government-sponsored group also labelled any person who deals with Lord Avebury a "traitor" for the country and the nation.

Nine people, four men, four women and one interpreter made their way to the British Embassy on 28 May and claimed that they represented the so-called "Ansar Al-Sunnah" to protest against the invitation of Lord Avebury by the Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS).

All these moves were not as astonishing as what happened on 2 June when the two semi-official dailies, Akhbar Al-Khalij and Al-Ayyam, together with their sister English ones, Gulf Daily News and Bahrain Tribune, gave full coverage and full support for the bogus group. The dailies published exact sentences that came in the two pamphlets distributed by the government-sponsored group.

The people of Bahrain were angered to witness the hypocrisy of the government at a time when the Amir has repeatedly said that all citizens are equal before the law, and that all discriminations will end. Yet, the government sponsored a sectarian name to distribute slanders and insults against one of the most respected human rights campaigners who stood for the people of Bahrain during all the years of oppression and repression.

The return of Bahrain to the black era is now looming with many indications that the torturers and the mercenary elite that ruled the country in the most vicious manner are back in action on many fronts. These selfish and influential holders of power have been angered by the unity of the people who have come together from all sects and sections of the society to vow their support for a better future for Bahrain.

The Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS) issued a statement on 3 June condemning the savage attack launched by the two daily newspapers in Bahrain (Akhbar Al-Khalij and Al-Ayyam) and their English versions on Lord Avebury on 2 June. The BHRS said that it was "astonished that the daily newspapers attributed the source of their attack to some elements whom they called as "activists", and that these activists have decided that anyone dealing with Lord Avebury was a traitor. We are dismayed at this type of language which contradicts the political openness, which Bahrain is undergoing. The BHRS had hoped that the media would refrain from such language and would upgrade their level to the style of the Amir and his approach. The Amir has managed to reverse the bad image of Bahrain abroad and the media should have been responsible enough not to become a forum for unknown individuals calling themselves "activists". "

The BHRS went on to say that "recently Bahrain was visited by delegations from Amnesty International, French Socialist Party, and International Labour Organisation. All these were critical of the situation in Bahrain in the past.