

BAHRAIN

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

International community urged to stop the rape of a country

The situation in the Gulf state of Bahrain is approaching the stage of explosion of public anger as more destructive policies of the Al Khalifa are unveiled. The latest was the announcement by the ruling family that up to 20,000 people have recently been granted Bahraini nationality. They are mainly former employees of the ministry of interior and their dependents, some of whom may have served as torturers. News also surfaced that more than 5000 of the Al Murra tribe have also been granted Bahraini nationality. They had been stripped of their Qatari nationality after being accused by the authorities of Qatar of siding with the Saudis in the coup plot against the present ruler. Over the past five years tens of thousands of foreigners, mainly from areas known for its extreme views and fanaticism were naturalised by the Al Khalifa. Since the elected parliament was dissolved in 1975, the ruling family has been ruling the country with absolute dictatorship, enacting their own laws and embarking on the most serious and destructive programme since they occupied the islands in 1783; that of political naturalisation.

The Al Khalifa have, in recent years, revived the 1963 Nationality Law which regulates the granting of the Bahraini nationality. One of its clauses gives the ruler the right, in exceptional circumstances, to grant individuals the Bahraini citizenship. The exceptional has now become the rule, and probably more than 100,000 may have been naturalised by Sheikh Hamad. When the Al Khalifa Council of representatives presented some "recommendations" three months ago asking the ruling family to regulate the "exceptions" they were told openly and robustly that Sheikh Hamad was above all powers and, as such, the government could not regulate these "exceptions". What this means is that he had been given a cart blanche to change the demography of the country without the need to refer to anyone, and without anyone having the right to question him. This is extremely dangerous and contradicts any claims of democracy and the rule of law.

The native people of Bahrain are thus infuriated by these assertions and are be-

coming more angry and frustrated as they see foreigners unlawfully being naturalised and given all their needs of housing, social welfare and jobs while the natives are being sidelined and deprived of any of these preferential treatment.

The unemployed, whose numbers could easily reach 30 percent, have been attempting to put pressure on the Al Khalifa in order to change their employment and naturalisation processes. They have petitioned the government, demonstrated in the streets and even taken their case to Sheikh Hamad's courtyard. Instead of giving them a listening ear, Sheikh Hamad dispatched his mercenaries to beat the hungry and the dispossessed for demonstrating outside his palace. The images of the wounds sustained in this attack which took place in the middle of June, have been circulated to the outside world and caused a furore among the human rights activists and organisations. To date, none of the torturers who carried out this savagery, has been brought to account for this horrific crime. The internationally-renowned human rights activist, Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja, sustained broken teeth and bruises as he was lashed repeatedly by the Al Khalifa mercenaries with hoses.

As the people of Bahrain prepare to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the dissolution of the elected parliament and the suspension of some articles of the only legally-binding document between the Al Khalifa and the people of Bahrain, they face two major crisis. First their struggle to achieve a degree of democracy has not yet led to the long-awaited democracy in the country. If anything, the Al Khalifa, under Sheikh Hamad, has become more repressive and less democratic. The real power are concentrated in the hands of the ruler, whose dictatorship is now endorsed by his tailor-made constitution which he imposed on the people in February 2002. The struggle to achieve real reforms is thus continuing. Several massive demonstrations have taken place in the past few months, with participants in

tens of thousands taking part in expressing their views. They have shown bravery as they faced the prospects of attacks from the Al Khalifa mercenaries who have been awarded the Bahraini nationality in return for their savagery against the people of Bahrain.

Second, the crisis of the country has deepened with Sheikh Hamad's explicit policy of demographic change. The natives have now realised that they are engaged in a struggle on the basis of "to be or not to be", i.e. they are waging a peaceful struggle to safeguard their own existence, while the rights have taken a secondary place. There is no use of political rights if the existence of the natives is denied or marginalised. Even if full democracy is introduced after the demographic change has been achieved, it will be a void democracy with no real benefits to the people. Furthermore, they feel that Sheikh Hamad's policy of demographic change is also intended to sow the seeds of discord among the natives, Shia and Sunnis. Most of the Sunni tribes who had historically been allies of the Al Khalifa, find it extremely useful to "Bahrainise" their relatives across the borders in Saudi Arabia, while the Shia, who were made up more than 80 percent in the seventies and over 70 percent when Sheikh Hamad took over, feel that they are being marginalised in the new era as more Sunnis are brought into the country. This is in the benefit of neither the Shias or the Sunnis. It could only benefit the Al Khalifa who will then claim to represent the majority.

This year is thus a tragic year for the people of Bahrain, as they brace themselves to more bad news both on democratic and demographic fronts. The international community is thus urged to intervene to stop the cultural genocide of the natives of Bahrain by the Al Khalifa ruling family who had occupied the land and blundered its wealth. Silence in the face of a crime of this volume is not an option for human-loving and freedom-seeking world community. The native people of Bahrain are appealing for help, they deserve to be rescued from the pawns of these vicious rulers.

After the events of Black Sunday World Community must protect Bahraini people

The vicious attack last Sunday on the hungry and the dispossessed by the security forces has highlighted the need for international protection of the people of Bahrain. The Al Khalifa ruling family have been subjecting the people of Bahrain to all forms of repression, including the administering of torture on detainees. This was confirmed by this week's events and the photographs of the wounds inflicted on human rights campaigners must be taken seriously by the world community.

The unemployed youth had organised a peaceful demonstration in front of the palace of Sheikh Hamad, who had declared himself a king three years ago. The few hundred Bahraini youth had loafs of bread in their hands to attract attention to their plight. Their aim was to draw the attention of Sheikh Hamad to their dire situation. Shortly after they started the demonstration, they were faced by heavily armed forces who waged a vicious attack on the unarmed youth. Many were injured on the spot, while scores were detained. It is estimated that about thirty of them were taken to torture chambers where they

were severely beaten and tortured. Among them was Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja, the President of the Bahrain Society for Human Rights, whose teeth were broken during the torture sessions. His photos confirm that he had been subjected to horrific treatment by the torturers who were apparently ordered by Abdul Aziz Atiyyat Allah Al Khalifa, the head of the Al Khalifa torture apparatus. The photos of many others show clear signs of beatings on various parts of the body. Their backs show clearly marks of severe beating, while broken limbs and head wounds have reminded people of the days when the Al Khalifa administered torture at the widest level.

The events of the Black Sunday have sealed the end of any hope that Sheikh Hamad would institute reforms. Since he declared himself a king, the situation has been deteriorating at an alarming rate. After imposing his tailor-made constitution and repealing the 1973 constitution, the only source of legal legitimacy of the Al Khalifa rule, he has imposed several laws to curtail public freedoms and end the calls for democracy, including the Press Law, the Law of Congregations, Law 56 (which protects torturers) and the Law of the Societies. None of

these law conforms with the most basic requirement of free speech. Economic corruption has been on the increase with whole islands given to members of the Al Khalifa family (Umm Al Na'ssan, Jeda and Umm Al Subban; the last two have been given new names). Furthermore, Sheikh Hamad and his son, Sheikh Salman, have blundered the country's coastline, and gave concessions to their cronies to reclaim sea land. The ruling family thought that their deception programme was enough to silence the people of Bahrain. Now events have proven that they are wrong.

The people of Bahrain are appealing to the international community to take serious action to stop this corrupt family from pursuing its evil aims of blundering the wealth of the country, irreversibly changing its demography and humiliating its people through acts of charity, and denying them a proper constitutional democracy. They are also calling on the international human rights organisations to intervene immediately to stop torture, support human rights activists and demand an immediate impartial investigation into the crimes committed by the Al Khalifa ruling family against the hungry demonstrators on Sunday 19th June 2005.

The International Day in Support of Torture Victims

Civil society institutions throughout the world commemorate the anniversary of The International Day in Support of Victims of Torture on the 26th of June every year to remind people of the ongoing suffering of large numbers of human beings at the hands of security forces in some countries aimed at taking revenge from prisoners of conscience and others or in an attempt to extract confession. The security forces use harsh and degrading techniques that lead to death in some cases. In this context Bahrain has witnessed violent practices since the fiftieth of the past century, especially after the dissolution of the Parliament in mid seventies of that century. These practices reached their climax during the events of mid seventies in which dozens of people were martyred under systematic torture. Prisons were also filled with thousands who suffered at the hands of torturers resulting in visible bodily wounds and series psychological suffering.

Human rights and political societies and popular committees share this occasion with their counter parts in the world, while recalling the pains suffered by victims of torture during the dark period witnessed by Bahrain at the hands of custodians of the state security law, and declaring their solidarity with the victims of torture in Bahrain.

The case of martyrs and victims of torture in Bahrain has achieved many successes starting from the unanimous local and interna-

tional support, through the continuity and escalation of victim demands by peaceful demonstrations and sit-ins, up to outstanding success achieved with the issuance of recommendations of the international anti-torture committee in Geneva meeting in May 2005. These recommendations dealt an international blow to law no 56 just as it did with the previous state security law leaving them both internationally invalid. These recommendations confirmed the

rights and demands of families of tortured victims and martyrs in Bahrain. We emphasize herein the most significant recommendations and call upon the authorities to implement them. They are:

Adopt in domestic penal law a definition of torture in terms consistent with article 1 of the Convention.

Provide complete and disaggregated information about the number of detainees who have suffered torture or ill-treatment including any deaths in custody.

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Controversial Counterterrorism Law, Family Courts Challenged

Carnegie's Arab Reform Bulletin

A new draft law on counterterrorism is the subject of heated debate in Bahrain. Non-governmental organizations and reform activists have criticized the law, submitted by the government to parliament for "urgent consideration" in March 2005, on the grounds that it would allow authorities to restrict political liberties. In a report to the UN Committee Against Torture (CAT) on May 11, the Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) asserted the law includes "broad definitions of terrorism and terrorist organizations which threaten freedoms such as freedom of assembly and expression or the right to strike; widens the scope of applicability of the death penalty, and grants special prosecutorial powers with regard to such crimes." The CAT issued a list of recommendations to the Bahraini government and also suggested the government amend Decree 56 of 2002, which gives impunity to officials who perpetrate or acquiesce in torture.

In another development, prominent feminist Ghada Jamsheer has been charged with slander for accusing family court judges in Bahrain of being "corrupt, biased, and unqualified" and calling a specific judge "rude and unfair." If convicted, she faces up to 15 years in prison. Separate sharia courts for Sunni and Shiite Muslims in Bahrain hear personal status cases, including marriage, divorce, and inheritance cases. There are no codified personal status laws, allowing judges to render judgments according to their own reading of Islamic law. Click here to read a Human Rights Watch report on the case.

In Bahrain, Doubts About Reform

By Nora Boustany

When King Hamad bin Isa Khalifa of Bahrain embarked on political reform in his small kingdom four years ago and offered amnesty to student activists living in exile, Abdul Hadi Khawaja decided it was time to go home.

Khawaja had left his homeland in the early 1980s, spending years in Geneva, Copenhagen and London, where he completed his studies. He had tried to return once before, in 1993 for his father's funeral, but his name remained on a blacklist. He was detained at the airport for 10 days before being deported to Lebanon, he said.

After finally returning to Bahrain in 2001, Khawaja and his colleague, Nabeel Rajab, opened the Bahrain Center for Human Rights in Manama, the capital. After struggling for more than 11 months and with a push from the king, Rajab finally got the government to register the center, which set out to monitor human rights, employment conditions and the treatment of a large expatriate community. But last year, after Khawaja gave a speech criticizing the prime minister, the center was shut down.

Last Sunday, Khawaja was observing a demonstration against the lack of employment opportunities in Bahrain. Riot police beat up about 50 of the demonstrators and briefly detained some of them. According to Rajab, Khawaja was beaten, too.

Rajab, reached by telephone in Bahrain on Wednesday, said that he had been detained for half an hour. "Many of the men taking part in the peaceful protest were badly beaten and bruised by police, and four remain in the hospital. They broke Abdul Hadi's teeth. We had just gone there to observe and make sure no one was hurt," he said.

Bahrain, an archipelago of desert islands between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, has recently been praised by the United States for holding elections three years ago and broadening certain liberties. But human rights organizations and activists maintain that much remains to be done in terms of institutionalizing reforms and ending police brutality and torture committed under the guise of maintaining order.

Khawaja's story has had many twists and turns -- exile, detention, amnesty, pardons and brutality. His recent encounters suggest that Bahrain's declared reforms, which are not enshrined in a legal framework, remain selective.

Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group have pressed for laws to protect freedoms and democracy in Bahrain, which is in the process of concluding a trade agreement with the United States. The United States also relies on Bahrain for strategic needs, such as the positioning of the 5th Fleet in the Persian Gulf.

In Bahrain, foreign laborers and domestic workers make up as many as 300,000 of the country's population of 700,000, Rajab said. Last year, the center prepared a report about the maltreatment of Asian domestic workers in the Middle East.

In an interview last month while he was visiting Washington, Khawaja said 40 percent of all suicides in Bahrain were among migrant women who come from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia and Ethiopia. According to Rajab, rapes are frequent, but few are reported.

"There is not one case of a Bahraini sentenced because of assault against domestic or other workers, not even one case," Rajab said. "When we take a domestic worker to the police for protection, they put her in jail. When the sponsor comes, they treat her as a criminal."

The center got into hot water last year after organizing seminars and issuing a report that covered discrimination against the country's Shiite majority (70 percent of the population), the status of women, privileges granted to the royal family and corruption. It was during a seminar in September, Khawaja said, that he accused the prime minister, Khalifa bin Salman Khalifa, of corruption.

"First I was arrested, and two days later, the center was shut down," Khawaja said. He was released after the U.S. government criticized his detention and the monarch personally intervened. Although attorneys for the center have failed to get it re-

opened, Rajab said, members continue to work underground.

"What happened in Bahrain is not democratization. Maybe there are better conditions for civil liberties and human rights," Khawaja said in the interview. "None of the changes in the constitution have been institutionalized, and the changes are turning the country into an absolute constitutional monarchy. The restrictive press laws are used selectively. In the last two years, many journalists have had to appear in court," he added.

According to Reporters Without Borders, that number has increased from 63 in 2002 to 100 in 2003 and 110 last year. It has reached 140 so far this year.

On May 6, the International Crisis Group cautioned that the application of reforms announced four years ago by the king has been "uneven and appears as simply the royal family institutionalizing its grip on power." The report also said that the government has "virtually done nothing to tackle sectarian discrimination and tensions."

As Bahrain's Shiites feel increasingly marginalized, more radical and confrontational elements appear poised for action. Khawaja and Rajab said only 18 percent of public sector jobs are held by Shiites.

Joe Stork, a Middle East specialist for Human Rights Watch, cautioned: "Given Bahrain's strategic value, Washington may be reluctant to criticize its ally, but a failure to do so could result in growing anti-U.S. sentiment in the kingdom."

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International Day – Cont from P 2

Consider steps to amend Decree 56 of 2002 to ensure there is no impunity to officials who have perpetrated or acquiesced in torture or other cruel and inhuman or degrading treatment.

Ensure that its legal system provides victims of past acts of torture with redress and an enforceable right to fair and adequate compensation.

Remove inappropriate restrictions on the work of non-governmental organizations especially those dealing with issues related to the Convention.

Detailed information on the practical implementation of legislation and the recommendations of the Committee.

The State party is encouraged to widely disseminate the reports submitted by Bahrain to the Committee as well as the Committee's conclusions and recommendations.

As we stand firm in support of all torture victims, we urge all civil society activists and organizations to unite for the cancellation of Decree Law No. 56 of 2002, and urge all concerned to cooperate in creating mechanisms and means of exerting pressure and to follow-up the issue to ensure the full implementation of all recommendations by the government of Bahrain, and the implementation of other clauses of the Anti-Torture Convention, to which Bahrain has become a

member, and which forms a part of its national law.

We demand the implementation of the following by the government of Bahrain to close this bloody file, which will remain open until brave steps are taken to close it: Implementation of the International Committee Recommendations without any deviation from the facts established therein, and fairness for the victims. We call upon the government to enable the victims to seek justice.

Repeal of Law 56 and to refer to justice all those who committed extra-judicial killings and torture. The aim is not to seek revenge, but to put the past with all its pains and sufferings behind us.

Reinstate the martyrs, consider them as martyrs for the country and compensate their families.

Document all cases of torture victims and give them fair material and literal compensation.

Build a monument for the martyrs and put their names on squares and streets.

Real Reform comes only when peoples rights are given back to them, victims are treated with justice and torturers are subjected to trial. These are the bases of real national conciliation called for by human rights and international organizations and actually implemented by South Africa and Morocco. **Signed by 10 NGOs**

Internet a powerful tool in Bahrain's push for democracy

The tiny nation is a microcosm for technological and political change in the Middle East, writes Jane Kinninmont

The tiny Gulf kingdom of Bahrain hits the headlines only once a year - when the Formula One motor race comes to town - yet it's witnessing some of the most passionate calls for democracy in the Middle East.

Washington, which bases part of its naval fleet in Bahraini waters, has said the country is one of the most democratic states in the region. But as popular protests become more frequent, the government is clamping down on critics.

After this year's Formula One celebrations finished, and the media spotlight moved on, the government announced it would press charges against three young bloggers. The men face up to 10 years in jail for running a website whose users criticised the king.

Bahrain is a tiny island of 700,000 people just off the coast of Saudi Arabia. Compared with its giant neighbour, it's taken brave steps towards democracy. Since 2002, there has been a constitution and an elected chamber of parliament. Women vote. But the elected body has little real power, and civil liberties are fragile. And while most of the population are Shi'ite Muslims, the political and business elite are almost exclusively Sunni.

As in most of the Gulf, oil underpins the economy but many Shi'ites think they haven't shared in this wealth. Unemployment is unofficially estimated at 15-20 per cent - and is much higher among Shi'ites. Poverty is far more evident than in nearby Qatar or Dubai. Even the cats are thinner.

While the business districts gleam with new skyscrapers, there are houses in serious disrepair in the capital. Religious opposition groups are growing in popularity, and one reason is their economic services: they help repair houses and even pay for mass weddings.

Inspired by this year's elections in Iraq, the pro-democracy protests in Egypt and the "cedar revolution" in Lebanon, Bahrainis are calling for a greater say in politics. Demonstrations - rare a year ago - are now regular occurrences.

Tens of thousands marched through the capital, Manama, this year, demanding more power for the parliament. A blogger and photographer, Chan'ad, said: "When the reforms started, people were scared to speak out. Now there's a demonstration every week."

There was violent unrest in Bahrain during the 1990s, but the Shi'ite Islamists, who lead today's opposition, avoid violence and distance themselves from terrorism. "There are angry youths who want to fight back when the riot police come in at demonstrations," said Chan'ad. "But organisers know they have international attention and are clear they need

peaceful means to gain the moral upper hand."

Bahrain's activists have a sophisticated grasp of modern communications technology, using Bluetooth phones to organise demonstrations and spreading photos of protests around the world through emails and blogs. "Anyone who wants to organise a demo now sends a message out through Bluetooth on their mobile phones," said "Stravinsky", a student blogger.

"They can reach 30,000 users in Bahrain without being traced. Then they text people video clips of the demo."

Earlier this month, the government proposed a law to regulate Bluetooth usage, under which "misuse" would be punishable by up to five years in jail. Authorities say the law is to stop pornography. According to Mahmood al-Yousif, Bahrain's first blogger: "There are no borders for the media any more. Al-Jazeera reporters are banned from Bahrain, but they hire locals to film reports which they upload on to the internet."

Bahrain's bloggers come from a wide range of backgrounds and political perspectives, united only by the excitement of self-expression in a country where most of the media is controlled by the state.

Still, the authorities are attempting to clamp down on the free use of the media. In May, the government said bloggers must register their real names with the ministry of information. And the three bloggers facing criminal charges are a warning to others. One of the bloggers facing trial, Ali Abdulemam, founded Bahrain's first website in 1999. BahrainOnline.org is an open-source web forum where any one of the 26,000 registered users can publish their views. In a country where, as another blogger puts it, 'they need to know the political opinions of your mother's mother before you can become an accredited journalist',

Vicious attack on the hungry

On 19th June, the unemployed, joined by human rights activists and politicians, marched from the Riffa roundabout towards the royal court in order to express their grievances and show their deprivation in the oil rich country. Soon after the start of the demonstration, the riot police backed by secret agents in civilian clothes launched a brutal attack on the demonstrators inflicting heavy injuries on a number of them and arresting an estimated 30 demonstrators.

torture in the form of severe beating, while few of the demonstrators were taken to two hospitals after suffering from heavy injuries at the attack site. One of the demonstrators was run down by a police car and left in place, he was then taken to hospital by his colleagues.

this was a radical move.

Although the state telecoms monopoly has been trying to block it since 2002, Bahrain Online is the country's most popular website. Bahrain's technologically literate youth have become adept at accessing the site - which is hosted in the US - through proxy addresses.

Having failed to censor the site, the Bahraini authorities took more drastic action. Mr Abdulemam and the site's two other moderators were arrested this year, and detained on five charges including "inciting hatred against the government" and "defaming the king".

Their lawyer said the charges relate to postings which they themselves did not write, and a government source confirmed this.

"This site came before even the government had a website. They still don't understand what the internet means, especially the idea of live chat. I hadn't even seen the postings they showed me - but I could face up to 10 years in prison just for publishing a website," Mr Abdulemam said.

Particularly colourful personal insults have been directed against the prime minister, a powerful businessman who is also the king's uncle. Criticising the prime minister is a dangerous business; Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, then director of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) was jailed last September after he called for the prime minister's resignation. Mr Khawaja was freed in November when the king intervened to pardon him, but the BCHR remains closed.

Many Bahrainis say that, as in Saudi Arabia, the ruling family is divided over the issue of reform. Most associate the prime minister with the conservative faction, while the crown prince is the leading liberal.

Intriguingly, Mr Khawaja's arrest took place the day after the crown prince publicly called for economic reforms and for greater rights for immigrant workers. The prince made a similar speech earlier this year - and the Bahrain Online three were detained shortly after.

However, if the arrests were intended to silence reformists, they have backfired. "Since the Bahrain Online arrests, new blogs keep popping up," said Stravinsky. Given its close ties to Washington, Bahrain will be a key test of the US' stated commitment to democracy and freedom in the Middle East. The US embassy in Bahrain has spoken to Mr Abdulemam about his case, but has not yet commented publicly.

Although strongly opposed to the Iraq war, Mr Abdulemam said: "Condoleezza Rice is putting real pressure on Bahrain for democracy. I don't want them to invade my country, but if the US will help us, we will shake their hand."

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