

BAHRAIN

Issued by the "Bahrain Freedom Movement" to promote human and constitutional rights

Internationalising the case of Bahrain to end hereditary dictatorship

The decision by the UN Human Rights Council to investigate the human rights records of three countries; Bahrain, Tunisia and Ecuador has been greeted with appreciation from both victims and human rights activists. The Bahraini regime has exploited the human rights issue through a variety of means. First, it gave false impression of its respect of human rights while perpetrating human rights abuses at any opportune moments. Second, it sheltered torturers and refused to heed calls from their victims to bring them to justice. The notorious Law 56/2002 was imposed to provide this shelter and despite many calls from international human rights bodies to amend it to exclude impunity for these criminals, the Al Khalifa have not heeded these calls. Third, the lack of international actions against the Bahraini regime has encouraged it to engage in abuses at different levels including extra-judicial killings. The latest victim is Abbas Al Shakhouri who was ruthlessly murdered few months ago by Death Squads run by the royal court. Last year, another young man, Mahdi Abdul Rahman was murdered by these squads but no one has ever been brought to justice.

The Bahraini regime sought to exaggerate the significance of its membership two years ago of the UN Human Rights Council, and exploited it to silence opposition to its dictatorial rule. It is only appropriate to listen to the grievances of the torture victims and families of the victims of extra-judicial killings so that due process of law is upheld. It is now expected that the Al Khalifa rulers will resort to their familiar tactics of bribing individuals and bodies who are likely to criticise their inhumane behaviour. Few months ago it was revealed that they had paid \$1 million to one of the UN bodies related to human development, only for this body to grant Bahrain's prime minister an honorary doctorate "in recognition of his role in human development in Bahrain". The honour led to an outrage among victims of the PM's repression who saw the award as both insulting and insensitive. They called on the UN Secretary General to investigate this brazen corruption and take measures to stop oil-rich rulers to blunder their

people's money to protect their own skin. In a country where tens of thousands of citizens have spent parts of their lives in torture cells, how can one speak of human development? In 1997 there was an uproar at the meeting of the UN Human Rights Sub-commission after revelations by the British representative at the Sub Commission revealed that the Al Khalifa regime had given more than £100,000 to an organisation headed by one of the "experts" at the human rights panel.

This long history of corruption has been confirmed recently by the Transparency International which gave Bahrain low ranking. The regime is reported to be "extremely sad" by this news. It is expected that the regime would resort to other measures to safeguard its reputation. It has been announced that the information minister and former Ambassador to Washington has been re-located in Geneva. It appears to be a cunning move intended to present this well-spoken servant to defend the pride of the Al Khalifa which has been markedly dented. They need someone ready to continue their campaign of deception to the world. Slaves of dictatorships often become hooked to slavery and would not accept disengagement from chains. He has just been humiliated by his masters who have ceremoniously sacked him from his post as information minister due to his failure in running his ministry and creating more enemies among the staff. Despite the humiliation he is still ready to remain a faithful servant. He also has to defend the bloody record of the Al Khalifa at the UN Human Rights Council and prove to the world that the thousands of victims of torture had been tortured for good purposes.

The internationalising of the case of Bahrain is a positive step. Dictatorships flourish in the absence of foreign interest in the affairs of their countries. The military junta in Burma have counted on the lack of interest of the outside world in the way they had been running the country. Now that the Monks have spearheaded the revolt against the military dictatorship, the situation has fun-

damentally changed. The killing of monks and other civilian protesters could well bring the downfall of the junta. It is the capability of the world to withstand dictatorships that has encouraged the military to continue their mischief in that country. In Nepal, the struggle of the people has also managed to defeat the king's absolute rule to the extent that monarchy could soon be abolished in Nepal. It will be a sound victory for the people power. In Bahrain, the hereditary dictatorship has been propped up by USA and UK for many years. They have been encouraged by these powers to continue their authoritarian rule through repression, human rights violations and the ongoing population engineering. It is one of the worst crimes ever committed by a regime. These powers have failed to curtail their excesses and disrespect for human rights. It will be disastrous to ignore the please of ordinary Bahrainis who aspire to a situation without this absolute dictatorship.

There are glimpses of hope. The young generation is rising up in strength and determination. A quiet rebellion is taking shape especially among the youth who see no future for them under the prevailing policies of Sheikh Hamad and his uncle, the prime minister. The recent cabinet reshuffle has also confirmed the people's suspicion as Sheikh Hamad allocated 16 ministerial posts to members of the ruling family while the rest of the people (the majority Shia and the Sunnis) have been allocated only the cabinet posts. Other monarchies in the Middle East such as in Morocco and Jordan the ruling family does not hold ministerial posts, something that the Al Khalifa could not emulate. It is our hope that the latest blunders by the regime would evoke memories of evil regimes who had exercised absolute rule over the people. The recent experiences in Nepal and Burma have shown the inability to dictatorships led by military men to cope with the needs of modern societies. The ruler of Bahrain, with his military training and his failed political programme has proven, beyond doubt, that dictatorships are doomed. Internationalising the Bahraini case could prove to be the final nail in the coffin of the Al Khalifa.

Poverty is at the heart of the problem, it could result in political mayhem

An atmosphere of disappointment has clouded the political sky in the country after the announcement of a general pay increases in the region of 10-15 percent for public sector employees. Salaries had been frozen for several years, while oil prices increased from \$15 to \$70 per barrel in that period. It is estimated that the surplus in the budget is in reservedly put at \$1.5 billion. No one knows where that amount goes although most people suspect that the ruling family has plundered the country's wealth beyond limits. The teachers in particular have held several demonstrations demanding improvement of their working conditions and salaries, and have demanded 30 percent pay rise. The announcement that only 10-15 percent rises would be given came as a shock to most of them. This is a time when living costs have risen sharply over the past few years while housing prices have rocketed to reach levels beyond the reach of most Bahraini working class. The Al Khalifa have adopted a policy of encouraging foreign ownership of the limited land in the country, in order to force the natives to seek jobs in other Gulf states.

Meanwhile, the frustrated citizens whose chances of getting jobs are diminishing have handed documents to the office of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Beirut.

A local economist described the low pay increase as a short-lived anaesthetic. Mr Uthman Abu Deeb said that the government ought to have given higher increase to the Bahraini workers because the expatriates have enjoyed other benefits not available to Bahrainis. Others have compared the low pay increase to the 90 - 100 percent pay increase offered by the Qatari Government to its citizens. They said that this increase will cost the government around BD22 million, while the surplus in the budget is in excess of BD 528 million. The difference (more than half a billion Bahraini Dinar, equivalent to US\$ 1.5 billion is plundered by the ruling family.

Mr Mohammad Al Masqati, the President of the Human Rights Youth Organisation has indicated that the documents included the Law of Unemployment, the rules concerning the low-paid, and the grievances of the unemployed. Films relating to these issues have also been handed to the ILO office. This step came, according to Al

masqati, after all domestic avenues failed to bring satisfactory results. He promised to take the case of the unemployed to other international bodies to exposed the failed policies of the ruling family.

As the economic miseries begin to bite into the social fabric, voices are raised against the criminal intentions of the regime. Questions continue to be raised in connection to the Al Khalifa discriminatory policies that exclude Shia citizens from employment with the ministries of interior and defence, police force, customs and airport. Sunnis are also excluded from some areas due to the lack of trust by the ruling family and their suspicion of the native population. Most of the elements in these services are foreigners from Yemen, Pakistan and Syria. There is now a burgeoning community of settlers who are wholly accommodated in segregation in some towns in the South of the country. Employment within these areas are conducted along ethnic and religious lines that are uniquely distinctive from other departments. They favour those of non-Bahraini origin. This discrimination is at the heart of the governmental policies and is unlikely to be remedied soon.

Targeting activists at a time of heightened tension

Attacks on activists has increased in recent months and taken more sinister dimensions; including kidnapping. The latest such crime was committed last week when a young activist was kidnapped by Death Squads which are run by the royal court. Mr Hassan Abdul Nabi, a member of the National Committee of the Unemployed was arrested yesterday for protesting openly near the palace of the ruler. He was snatched by death squads under the control of Lieutenant Osama who maltreated his victim. For more than seven hours, Mr Abdul Nabi was subjected to horrific treatment and threatened by his captors with "liquidation and forcible banishment from this world". He was told that his fate would not be too dissimilar from the one that had befallen Musa Abd Ali who has been granted political asylum in UK following his brutal ordeal at the hands of those death squads. His family spent the day looking for him and all efforts to locate his whereabouts failed, until he appeared late afternoon in a bad physical shape.

At the same time another activist whose identity would not be exposed for fear of retribution has also been subjected to horrific ordeal at the hands of the death squads. Mr A.A. was arrested from his workplace, taken to Al Muharraq

Police Command Centre, tortured and subjected to severe attack during interrogation. The officer who oversaw the torture session was Major Ra'id Abdulla Al Hadi. The arrest came after the victims had taken part in a local religious function in the town of Arad in which references were made to the crime of demographic change and its impact on economy and housing. The torturers belonging to the death squads employed plastic hoses to inflict heavy injuries on the body of the victim. He was later blackmailed to keep his ordeal secret or risk further torture and maltreatment at the hands of Al Hadi. Since his release, he had lived in fear for his life and that of his family members. Appeals have been to the international community, especially human rights activists to take an active role against the use of these horrific practices and stop persecution of Bahraini natives.

Meanwhile the Bahrainis teachers have been engaged in protests against the ruling family for the unfair treatment they have been subjected to. Over the past three days, they have organised pickets outside

the Ministry of Education's building in Isa Town expressing their dismay at being excluded from the general increase in salaries of the public sector. The President of the Committee of Teachers, Mahdi Abu Deeb said their pickets and protests would continue as long as necessary to demand proper pay rises in line with others. There are three factors contributing to the frustration of the teachers: First the continued employment of foreign teachers when Bahraini graduates are unemployed. Second, the high inflation in the country which is not compensated by pay rises. Third, the recent royal decree that led to pay rises among public sector employees of around 15 percent, but excluded the teachers. Forth is the huge surplus in the oil revenues; this surplus is off the record and is siphoned off by senior officials of the ruling family. The case is taking a central position in the country's affairs and there is increasing sympathy with their demands.

These developments have come at a time of increased activism, starting with a major function at Karzakkan town in the South of the country. The seminar was addressed by prominent figures such as Mr Hassan Mushaime', Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja and Sheikh Mohammad Ali Al Mahfoodh. The speakers highlighted the failure of the political programme of the ruling family and promised more proactive approach to achieve the rights of the people to run their own affair, write their constitution and take part in meaningful elections.



Corruption index blow for Bahrain

BAHRAIN was among 11 countries cited by Transparency International yesterday as having a "significant worsening in levels of perceived corruption" this year, despite retaining its rank as the third least corrupt country in the Arab world. Its global ranking also dropped in the 2007 Corruption Perception Index (CPI) from 36, among 163 countries last year, to 46, among 180 countries this year.

The index scores countries on a scale from zero to 10, with zero indicating high levels of perceived corruption and 10 indicating low levels.

Bahrain's score of 5.0 was down compared to last year's 5.7 and 2005's score of 5.6. TI's corruption perceptions index focuses on the public sector and defines corruption as "the abuse of public office for private gain". Among the index's sources are surveys by the World Bank, the Economist Intelligence Unit, the African Development Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

The Berlin-based organisation said that countries with a significant worsening corruption levels include Austria, Bahrain, Belize, Jordan, Laos, Macao, Malta, Mauritius, Oman, Papua New Guinea and Thailand.

The 11 countries were also ranked among countries whose scores deteriorated most between last year and this year. "In these cases, actual changes in perceptions occurred during the last two years," said TI in its report.

About the Middle East, the report states that this year's results "make clear that corruption and lack of transparency still constitute a very important challenge for development of the region".

It highlighted countries that ratified the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), namely Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar, the UAE and Yemen.

Bahrain signed the UNCAC on February 8, 2005, but has not yet ratified it.

Countries with a significant improvement included Costa Rica, Cuba, Czech Republic, Dominica, Italy, Macedonia, Romania and Suriname.

Among the major powers, Britain was ranked 12th, Germany 16th, Japan 17th, France 19th, the US 20th, while China, Brazil and India were tied at 72nd place, and Russia was 143rd.

Worst ranked for corruption were Myanmar and Somalia with a score of just 1.4, followed by Iraq on 1.5 and Haiti, which was bottom of last year's list with 1.6 points.

Officials from the Arab Shipbuilding and Repair Yard (Asry), Aluminium Bahrain (Alba) and Gulf Air are facing fraud and embezzlement charges as part of the country's efforts to step up its war on corruption.

A senior Asry official has been arrested and remanded in custody for a week for allegedly cheating the company out of BD40,000.

He is one of two Asry officials suspended following an extraordinary board meeting over investigation by an external auditor into alleged financial irregularities.

Six Gulf Air employees have also been charged with forgery and embezzlement.

They were among eight airline members of staff reported to the Public Prosecution by the airline on last Thursday for allegedly cheating customers.

Unwise promotion

By the Bahrain Center for Human Rights

On August 10, Crown Prince Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa issued decree 78 appointing Mohammed Ali Mohammed Al Qaed as chief executive of e-government. According to leaked government documents, Mohammed Al Qaed may have been a key architect in a plan to manipulate election results, promote sectarian distrust and division, and to ensure that Bahrain's Shia majority remain disenfranchised.

1. Al Bandergate Background:

A secret web lead by head of the Central Informatics Organisation Shaikh Ahmed bin Ateyatallah Al Khalifa, has allegedly been operating in Bahrain with an aim to manipulate the results of elections, maintain sectarian distrust and division, and to ensure that Bahrain's Shias remain oppressed and disenfranchised.

This information was leaked in a report which became known as the 'Al Bandergate', named for its author Dr. Salah Al Bandar, former strategic planning's chancellor at the Council of Ministers Affairs.

As a result of leaking the information, Dr Al Bander was deported to the United Kingdom on September 13th as he is a British citizen.

The 216-page report, which was distributed by the Gulf Centre for Democratic Development (GCDD), contains almost 200 pages of cheques, receipts, letters, bank statements and accounts sheets to support its claims.

2. Mohammed Al Qaed - the "right hand man"?

According to the Al Bandergate report, Shaikh Ahmed's "right hand man" was CIO IT directorate manager, electronic voting supervisor, and higher elections committee head, Mohammed Al Qaed. Mr Al Qaed also sat on the elections committee and has well-known connections with the islamists Al Menbar and Al Eslah groups.

The report states that he was paid BD 1,200 per month as supervisor of an "electronic group" which are involved in running Bahrain's e-voting program, running websites and Internet forums which foment sectarian hatred, and SMS campaigns for the organization. Among the leaked documents, a bill for BD 7,639 purportedly drawn up by Mr Al Qaed details payments made to individuals working on e-voting projects, technical assistance, administrative work and to pay for printers, scanners and computers is included in the report. It is matched with a cheque for the same amount written to Mr Al Qaed from Shaikh Ahmed.



New school year starts amid controversies

More than 140,000 government school students started the new academic year amid an increasingly bitter stand-off between the Education Ministry and the teachers' association over flexible timing, employment of graduates and wage increases. The ministry has waded into a controversy after officials said that they wanted the application of a flexible timing that would extend the school day by 90 minutes.

Several parents and the teachers' association blasted the decision, saying that students would suffer, mainly because of the lack of cafeterias. Parents who drove their children to and back from schools would also face huge difficulties, they said. But for Education Minister Majid Al Nuaimi, flexible timing meant better learning opportunities.

"Educators have repeatedly called for a

flexible timing that would better serve the interests of the students and meet the requirements of modern learning," he said in a press statement. "They also complained that students were not benefiting fully from the learning centres and from the educational, cultural and social activities held by the schools. So the extension of the school day would address such issues."

Unable to win the support of parents and teachers, the ministry, however, will not implement the new timings until they are approved by the Civil Service Bureau. Several strikes by the teachers forced the government to give salary increases of around 10 percent. The teachers have asked for 30 percent, and are reported to be extremely unhappy. Strikes are likely in the near future.

BCHR: Possible crackdown against activists after defaming them

The Bahrain center for Human Rights (BCHR) is highly concerned regarding the objectives and negative effects of the campaign run by the Bahraini Authorities to discredit the BCHR as well as other known activists. The information distributed includes fabricated accusations of relations to acts of violence which occurred in Bahrain during the eighties and nineties, sympathizing with Iran and coordinating with neo-conservatives in the United States!! Abdulhadi Alkhawaja, president of the BCHR has been a main target of the Authorities' defaming campaign (a Biography of Mr. Alkhawaja: See below).

The apparent objective of the campaign is to weaken regional and international cooperation and solidarity with members of the BCHR and other national activists who are considered out of the control of the Authorities. The BCHR's international relations have in many occasions served as protection for human rights activities and the release from detention of human rights defenders including the President of the BCHR in 2004 and 2007. (BCHR's Credibility and recent Int. activities: see below) The Bahraini Authorities has a record of defaming activists who report on, or publicly criticize, high ranking officials and Authorities policies, especially if western media and international human rights organizations are involved. The authorities use the national public media in its campaigns while the activists are denied access to defend themselves.

Details of the Campaign

The BCHR was informed by credible sources that Sheikh Khaled bin Ahmad Al-Khalifa, the powerful Minister of the Royal Court, held a meeting two months ago to speed efforts to encounter the "anti Authorities activities on the regional and international levels". The Minister, who emphasized specially on the "harm that BCHR inflicting to the image of the country", encouraged the attendees to contact and influence foreign media and human rights organizations and activists. He assured the participants of "unlimited budget" to carry out the outlined tasks. According to the sources, the meeting was attended by around 50 persons including selected officials from the Ministry of Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Security Bureau and members of two Authorities-operated GONGO's, namely the Bahrain Jurist Society, lead by Yousif Al-Hashemy and the Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society Lead by Shura-Council member Faisal Fulad.

Earlier this year, the Bahraini Authorities appointed Sheikh Abdulla Al-Khalifa, a senior security officer, as the head of foreign-media affairs at the Ministry of Information which "keeps control" on foreign-media reporting on the country. Before his

appointment, Sheikh Abdulla was the deputy head of National Security Bureau. The former head of the foreign-media affairs, Sheikh Khalifa Bin Abdulla Al-Khalifa was appointed as the Bahrain Ambassador to the UK to look after and mastermind the Authorities campaign against activities run from London.

As a result of the aforementioned, an office was opened in London for the the Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society to encounter the activities of human rights NGO's. A group of Arab journalists was formed and two new websites have been recently launched called "Illa Al-Watan" and "Bahrain Forum" which resort to publishing false reports about the BCHR and other political and human rights activists. Among the group working for the new ambassador are two consultants, Hassan Mousa, a former Human rights activist, and Hugh Canavan, a British who worked as an advisor to the foreign media section at the Ministry of Information in Bahrain before taking over the new role in London. Both Mousa and Canavan have been taken parts in activities representing that of the Bahrain Authorities and have been in delegations to Geneva and London to counter the activities of Bahraini human rights defenders, especially members of the BCHR. Mr. Mousa, although presents himself as member of OMCT, he is also a member of the Bahraini Government Delegations in official meetings with treaty bodies of United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR) like CERD: Committee of Elimination of Racial Discrimination and CAT: Committee Against Torture. Mr. Canavan participated in House of Lords event about Bahrain, scheduled on December 15th, 2005 taking and defending the postures of the Government of Bahrain.

The BCHR has been informed by foreign media reporters and members of International NGO's that they have received communications aimed at discrediting the BCHR and its president Abdulhadi Alkhawaja. Some of these communications were signed by Hugh Canavan who introduced himself as a British citizen and a former advisor of the Bahrain Ministry of Information. Mr. Hugh Canavan was a main editor of the "Bahrain Brief", published by the Bahrain Authorities to influence international opinion.

By examining the "information" sent by Mr. Canavan, it was found identical to information publicized in English by anonymous sources on well known websites such as Wikipedia.com and open democracy which contain falsified information clearly publicized to damage the BCHR's credibility and to create a positive image of members of the Al-Khalifa ruling family in Bahrain.

Bahrain Center for Human Rights: Credibility and recent activities:

1. The BCHR has maintained strong links and worked closely with international organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Frontline. The closure of the Center in 2004 served to enhance the BCHR's credibility on the regional and international levels. Post its formal dissolution by the Bahraini Authorities, the BCHR succeeded in securing memberships in well known International organizations such as: FIDH (The International Federation for Human Rights), IFEX (International Freedom of Expression exchange), and CARAM-Asia (a regional Asian organization working on Migrant Workers Rights). The BCHR was honoured to be frequently invited by the UN High Commission for Human Rights (UNHCR) to present alternatives (Shadow reports) to Bahrain State reports on Torture to Committees on Torture and Racial discrimination in 2005 and 2007.

2. Despite its closure (Official dissolution) in September 2004 and the various abuses and harassments against its members, BCHR activities have shown distinguished enhancements in volume and type of internal and international activities. Among the recent activities this year were an international campaign staged by the BCHR in Washington, New York, Brussels and Geneva, highlighting the different gross human rights violations in Bahrain. The Authorities may have been further provoked when one of BCHR members took part in the latest international media coverage by CNN, BBC, and well known newspapers highlighting: corruption of the ruling family in Bahrain, poverty, sectarian discrimination and failed democracy in Bahrain. Furthermore, the president of the BCHR addressed the 5th session of the UN Human Rights Council in June 2007 on the issue of corruption and failure in housing policies.

3. BCHR was successful in highlighting and blowing the whistle on many human rights violations, represent distinguished diversity of tasks. Some of these issues are:

- a. Freedom of expression and assembly
- b. Labour and migrants rights
- c. Activists and human rights defenders
- d. Victims of Torture
- e. Religious Freedom
- f. Political Naturalization
- g. Discrimination and Favoritism
- h. Corruption
- i. Poverty and Economical rights
- j. Women Rights
- k. Violating Legislations
- l. Guantanamo prisoners