

Joint NGO Letter to State Delegations at the United Nations Human Rights Council:

Call for Joint Action on Bahrain at the 20th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council

20 June, 2012

Your Excellency,

Since February 2011 the human rights situation in Bahrain has witnessed a severe deterioration. Widespread human rights violations have been carried out against peaceful protestors calling for democratic reform. Despite the establishment of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) in June 2011, and the BICI's findings of gross human rights violations, including torture and extra-judicial killings attributable to the government of Bahrain, the government has continued unabated its use of repressive and unlawful measures against mostly peaceful protestors, human rights defenders, and democracy activists, and frequent use of excessive force in cases of violent protests. Meanwhile, the government has failed to implement the key BICI recommendations regarding political prisoners and accountability for serious human rights crimes.

Despite this pattern, since the crisis began in February 2011, the Human Rights Council has ignored NGO calls for the Council to hold an urgent debate on the situation. Although the Human Rights Council has taken important measures to address the grave human rights violations in countries such as Libya and Syria, the Human Rights Council has remained silent on the situation in Bahrain. The time is long overdue for the Human Rights Council to recognize that the situation in Bahrain requires urgent and immediate attention, and to put an end to its selective response to the suppression of pro-democracy and anti-government protests in the Arab region.

We therefore urge your delegation to:

- ***Voice its concern about the situation in Bahrain by signing on to a joint cross-regional statement at the 20th Session of the Council. Such a statement should call on the Government of Bahrain to implement fully and without delay all recommendations of the BICI and fully cooperate with the UN human rights independent mechanisms, including the OHCHR and Special procedures of the Human Rights Council. Delegations should also call on the government of Bahrain to accept and implement the recommendations made to it during its Universal Periodic Review aimed at ending the current human rights crisis.***

Over the last year the Bahrain government has demonstrated a lack of political will to ensure accountability for past and ongoing grave human rights violations, or to allow for genuine democratic reform to take place. During the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Bahrain on 21 May 2012, the delegation of the Bahrain government refused to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation or that a human rights crisis exists in the country, choosing instead to deny the most basic of facts concerning the situation. This included assertions by the Bahrain delegation that there are “no restrictions on journalists entering Bahrain” and that there are “no prisoners of conscience” in the country. These assertions cannot be sustained in light of the clear, credible information gathered by the United Nations, international and Bahraini human rights organizations, and international media outlets.

In fact, since the release of the BICI report, there have been dozens of deaths of protesters and bystanders in connection with protests and demonstrations. Some security personnel were also injured. Human rights organizations in Bahrain report cases of deaths and serious injuries apparently due to excessive use of teargas, in some cases shot directly into people's homes.

Recently the Bahraini government has begun to accelerate the arbitrary imprisonment of prominent Bahraini human rights defenders. Nabeel Rajab, head of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, is currently detained in connection with messages on social media criticizing government policies and the ruling family. Other targeted defenders include Zainab al-Khawaja, Sayed Hadi al-Musawi, and Mohamed al-Tajer. Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, a leading human rights defender and political activist, continues to serve a life sentence following his conviction on charges related to his involvement in peaceful protests in February and March 2011. Many other persons detained solely for political reasons continue to be held in detention despite the recommendations of the BICI to release all such prisoners. The High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, has also called for the release of those detained for taking part in peaceful demonstrations.

Lawyers in Bahrain estimate the number of arbitrarily detained at approximately 800. Men and women are arrested and released almost on a daily basis as arbitrary arrests and raids without warrants continue, and allegations of torture continue. In the past three months a number of children under the age of 18 have been among those arrested.

At least four injured persons were arrested from hospitals in a continuing policy of restricting access to health care for injured protesters and suspected protesters. In this connection the government has prevented Medecins Sans Frontieres from operating clinics to address mounting injuries to protesters. A Physicians for Human Rights report issued on 21 May called *Under the Gun* outlines in extensive detail the militarization of the health care sector and the treatment of injured in homes.

The authorities have installed closed-circuit TV cameras in many interrogation rooms, in line with a BICI recommendation, but torture and other ill-treatment continues, though transferred to informal detention centers as documented by Human Rights Watch and the Bahrain Center for Human Rights.

Entry to Bahrain for journalists and international human rights organizations has been extremely restrictive since April 2011, if visas have been granted at all.

According to the General Federation of the Bahrain Trade Union, many of those dismissed from their jobs in relation to the protests have not yet been reinstated. Some of those reinstated were demoted, given new contracts, and were not compensated for their loss of earnings.

Political prisoners – including medics, teachers, and the prominent leaders of the protest movement whose cases were documented in the BICI report – remain in detention, and in some cases civilian appeals courts have upheld some convictions handed down by special military courts for offenses related to free expression and peaceful assembly. .

Businesses belonging to a Shia businessman were attacked by gangs, most recently in April 2012, while security forces that entered the store refused to intervene to prevent the looting. The businessman was accused of "supporting the protests." No one has been held accountable for the attacks. When human rights defender Nabeel Rajab pointed this out on his Twitter account, he was detained by the Interior Ministry.

These violations have occurred in the context of a country-wide campaign of retribution by the government against those who have participated or supported the pro-democracy protests that erupted in February 2011. It is important that the government of Bahrain urgently take concrete action to combat grave rights violations in the country and demonstrate an actual commitment to reform. A joint statement by UN member states during the proceedings of HRC 20 would be an appropriate and effective way to begin to encourage Bahrain to do so.

Signatories:

Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI)
Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
The Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC), Hong Kong
Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE), Egypt
Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR)
Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights (BYSHR)
Bahrain Transparency Society
Bahrain Human Rights Society
Bahrain Teachers Society
Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
CIVICUS- World Alliance for Citizen Participation
Conectas- Direitos Humanos, Brazil
East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (EHAHRDP)
Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR)
Egyptian Foundation for Advancement of the Childhood Conditions (EFACC)
Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR)
Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'Homme (FIDH)
Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR)
Gulf Civil Society Associations Forum
Human Rights Watch (HRW)
International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)
Kurdish Committee for Human Rights (RASSED), Syria
Moroccan Instance for Human Rights
Nazra for Feminist Studies, Egypt
Sahrawi Association of Victims (ASVDH), Western Sahara
Yemen Organization for Defending Rights and Democratic Freedoms
West African Human Rights Defenders Network (WAHRDN)