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BAHRAIN: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR A HALT TO UNFAIR TRIALS

The Bahraini authorities should act now to stop the unfair State Security Court trials of 59 defendants accused of involvement in an alleged Iranian-backed plot to overthrow the government, Amnesty International said today, as the verdicts of the first trial are expected shortly.

“These trials have been grossly unfair at all stages, and none of the defendants will have the right to appeal before a higher court. This is particularly alarming since if convicted, some of the defendants could face the death penalty,” the human rights organization said.

“Irrespective of the charges against them, the accused are entitled to a fair and public trial in line with international standards.”

A total of 81 people have been charged in this case but only 59 of them have appeared in court. The remainder are believed to be still at large, and the government announced that they would be tried *in absentia*.

Most of the sessions of the trials which began on 1 March have been held *in camera* at the Coast Guards (*Khafar al-Sawahel*) base in al-Muharraq. The defendants have been divided into eight groups and are being tried separately rather than as one group. Only in the first session of each trial, which involves the reading of the charges, have relatives of the accused been permitted to attend. No independent observers are able to attend the trials.

At the end of February and early March, several of the estimated 20 defence lawyers involved in the trials were interviewed by the foreign media. Shortly thereafter, all of them were summoned by the Minister of Justice and reportedly warned that dissemination of any information about the trials would not be tolerated and that they would face consequences if they failed to comply with his directive.

“This clearly shows that the government is intent on keeping a very tight lid on information pertaining to the conduct of these trials,” Amnesty International said.

The main defendants in the case are charged with conspiring with a foreign state to carry out acts hostile to Bahrain under Article 122 of the Penal Code, an offence punishable by death. They are also charged, together with most of the other defendants, with membership of an organization whose aim is to overthrow by force the “*political, social or economic system of the state*” under Article 159 of the Penal Code and which is punishable by up to life imprisonment. Some defendants also face charges relating to the illegal possession of firearms.

The Bahraini Government claimed that the defendants are members of the military wing of a prohibited organization, *Hizbullah-Bahrain*, said to be based in Tehran and assisted financially and militarily by Iran. Its alleged aim is the establishment, by violent means, of an Islamic republic in Bahrain loyal to Iran. Some of the main defendants in the case are charged with having contact with intelligence officials within Iran's Revolutionary Guards and to have received military training both in Iran and in *Hizbullah* camps in Lebanon.

Most of the 59 defendants were arrested at various times in early 1996, and on 3 June the Bahraini Government announced that a coup plot had been uncovered. Two days later, the "confessions" of some of them were broadcast on Bahraini television. Several of the defendants had been arrested after being forcibly returned to Bahrain from United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

"All of these defendants have been held incommunicado since their arrest and denied access to relatives and defence lawyers. We fear that their "confessions" may have been extracted under torture," Amnesty International said.

In Bahrain, such "confessions" are routinely used as the sole basis for conviction before the State Security Court. The sister of one of the defendants and the wife of another were allegedly brought before them in prison and threatened with rape if the defendants refused to participate in the televised confessions. Defence lawyers have also requested that at least three of the defendants be referred to a medical examiner, apparently in order to verify torture claims.

According to Amnesty International's information, defence lawyers were only permitted access to their clients on the first day of the trial, just before the start of the session. Their access to prosecution documents was restricted and they were given inadequate time to prepare their defence.

"It appears that so far, the case for the prosecution rests largely on the "confessions" of the accused, extracted during interrogation while they were held incommunicado. No other evidence is known to have been presented as conclusive proof of the existence of *Hizbullah-Bahrain* nor of the defendants' links with it," the human rights organization said.

Amnesty International is calling on the government to provide the organization with copies of all relevant records concerning these trials, including the charge sheets, medical records, records of any investigations of complaints of torture or ill-treatment, and to comply with the strict international standards applicable to trials involving the death penalty.

"Our requests for such information in past trials have been met with silence on the part of the government, as have our appeals to be allowed access to the country and to observe trials," Amnesty International said.

BACKGROUND

The human rights situation in Bahrain has remained grave since the outbreak of mass protests in December 1994 calling for the restoration of democratic rights. Between 1,000 to 1,500 political detainees and prisoners are currently being held, most of them without charge or trial. Torture and ill-treatment, including of women and children, remains rife. More than 150 people

were convicted after unfair trials before the State Security Court since March 1996, three of whom were sentenced to death.

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