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## **Bahrain: Critical report should spur human rights ‘turning point’**

Amnesty International today urged Bahrain’s government to usher in much-needed human rights reforms after a comprehensive independent report by international experts criticized the use of torture and “excessive force” during protests earlier this year.

The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report, released today amid fresh protests in Manama, was deeply critical of the authorities’ handling of demonstrations in February and March and other abuses in the following months.

It covered hundreds of cases of abuse and included strong recommendations for protecting human rights and delivering justice and reparations to victims.

“We hope Bahrain’s government will view this landmark report as a turning point in how it responds to human rights violations, and will use its recommendations to lay the foundations for far-reaching reform,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Acting Middle East and North Africa Director.

“The pattern of abuse documented by the BICI – including mass arrests of peaceful demonstrators, widespread torture in detention and dozens of flawed military trials of activists and professionals – must be relegated to the past and Bahraini authorities must fully establish the rule of law and deliver justice to the victims.”

Established by a royal decree on 29 June, the BICI gathered around 9,000 testimonies and interviewed some 5,000 people about abuses during and after pro-reform protests in February and March.

Hundreds of cases were covered, including beatings of protesters by security forces, mass arbitrary arrests of mainly Shi’a opposition activists and widespread torture, with five deaths resulting from torture in custody. In all, at least 35 people have died in connection with the protests, including five security personnel.

The report urged the Bahraini government to immediately establish an independent body made up of representatives of civil society, the opposition and the government; to oversee the implementation of the BICI’s recommendations; to usher in legislative reforms to ensure laws are in line with international human rights standards; and to bring to account those responsible for abuses.

Bahrain’s King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa responded to the report by vowing not to repeat the events following the protests in February and March.

In a statement on Monday, Bahrain’s cabinet admitted that security forces had been responsible for “instances of excessive force and mistreatment of detainees”.

It announced new initiatives, including the criminalization of torture – bringing Bahrain’s penal code in line with international standards – and the establishment of an independent national human rights body.

The government also said that it was prosecuting 20 cases against security officers, without giving any further details, and would set up a special fund to compensate victims of the clashes between security forces and protesters.

"The King's appointment of the BICI was a landmark development, as the commission's findings and recommendations testify," said Philip Luther.

"The true test now will be the speed, extent and seriousness with which the government follows through on the BICI's recommendations.

"In particular, the government must now deliver justice, ensure national laws are adequate to protect rights and work with civil society and opposition leaders to establish a truly independent and effective national body to monitor human rights according to a clear timetable."

A coalition of Bahraini civil society organizations published their own highly critical report on the protest aftermath yesterday.

The civil society report also called on Bahrain's international supporters to do more to promote human rights in the Gulf nation.

Notes to editors

Amnesty International researcher Said Boumedouha is available for interview from Bahrain.