

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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## **Bahrain: Harassment of human rights defenders must end**

Amnesty International is greatly concerned about the continuing harassment of human rights defenders in Bahrain despite the lifting yesterday of the state of emergency – termed the State of National Safety – imposed on 15 March at the height of popular protests in the capital, Manama. In recent days, several leading human rights activists have been summoned for questioning by Bahrain's military prosecutor about their peaceful activities in relation to the February-March protests, which were forcibly suppressed by government forces shortly after the emergency was imposed. Some have been banned from travelling abroad.

On the afternoon of 31 May, police went to the home of Nabeel Rajab, a leading human rights activist and director of the banned Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, and ordered him to report without delay to the office of the military prosecutor where he was then questioned, without the presence of a lawyer, from 6 pm to 11 pm. He was mostly asked about comments he had made in foreign media interviews and messages he had sent by Twitter about human rights violations in Bahrain, and whether he had participated in a peaceful protest march towards the Saudi Arabian embassy in Manama after Saudi Arabian troops were sent into Bahrain the day the state of emergency was declared. No charges were brought against him but he was warned that he could yet face trial before a National Safety Court, a special military court established under the state of emergency and which is continuing to operate even though the state of emergency is no longer in force.

Two days earlier, officials at Manama airport prevented him from taking a flight to Lebanon and told him that the authorities have banned him from leaving the country and travelling abroad but without specifying the reasons or legal basis for this ban.

Prior to this, Nabeel Rajab and his family have come under physical attack on at least two occasions. Tear gas was thrown into his home on 21 May, almost causing his brother, wife and daughter to suffocate before they could be helped to safety. In April, tear gas was thrown into both his and his mother's homes. No-one has been arrested for these attacks, prompting fears that they may have been carried out by members of the security forces or people acting on their behalf.

Three human rights lawyers were also questioned by the military prosecutor on 31 May. Mohammad Ahmad, Hafeedh Hafeedh and Mohammad al-Jishi, all of whom are currently acting as defence counsel for some of the 21 political leaders and activists currently on trial as alleged ringleaders of the protests, were questioned for several hours and then released, apparently after they were told that they are to face charges of illegal assembly in connection with a peaceful demonstration held outside the Ministry of Justice in March and inciting "hatred against the regime." The 21 leaders on trial are appearing before a National Safety Court, though they are all civilians. Seven of the 21 are being tried in their absence.

Another human rights defender, 'Abdullah al-Derazi, secretary general of the independent Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS), was summoned to appear before the military prosecutor on 22 May and questioned about a speech he had made at the Pearl Roundabout, the central meeting point of the protests, in March in which he condemned the human rights violations then taking place in Bahrain. He was also questioned about what he had said in

foreign media interviews about human rights in Bahrain. He was then released but told that he was being charged with attending a public gathering of more than five people, participating in unauthorized demonstrations and giving anti-government statements to the media. As yet, it is not known when he will face trial. He was suspended pending investigation from his employment as a lecturer in Bahrain University's English department on 17 April apparently because of his alleged role in the protests. In all, more than 2,000 people are reported to have been suspended or sacked from their jobs in an ongoing purge of those who supported the protests.

'Essa al-Ghayeb, another BHRS activist, was prevented from boarding a plane to Kuwait, where he was due to participate in a seminar about the death penalty, on 26 May. Officials told him that he has been banned from travelling abroad but gave no reasons for the ban and produced no written order.

Amnesty International is concerned that these individuals are being targeted by the Bahraini authorities on account of their peaceful and legitimate exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and assembly and because of their role in exposing evidence of human rights violations by the security forces in Bahrain. These actions grossly violate international human rights standards. The UN Declaration on human rights defenders states in Article 12 (2) that "The State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or *de jure* adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration."

Amnesty International is calling for an end to the harassment of human rights defenders in Bahrain who must be allowed to pursue their legitimate activities for the promotion and protection of human rights, and for the immediate lifting of the travel bans on Nabeel Rajab, 'Essa al-Ghayeb and any other human rights defenders who are subject to similar restrictions.