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BAHRAIN: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNS WIDESPREAD HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND CALLS FOR INVESTIGATIONS.

Amnesty International urges the Government of Bahrain to investigate grave violations of human rights committed by its forces since December 1994 in response to mass protests calling for the restoration of democratic rights.

In a 50-page report published today, the organization describes mass detention without trial of protesters, convictions after grossly unfair trials, the systematic and routine torture of detainees, killings of unarmed civilians and the forcible exile of Bahraini nationals.

"The brutality with which the protests have been put down plunged the country into a human rights crisis," Amnesty International said. None of the crimes committed over the past 10 months have been investigated and no one has been brought to justice.

Since December security forces and riot police, using live ammunition, have killed at least 10 unarmed demonstrators. One of the victims was 'Abd al-Hamid Qassem, a 17-year-old schoolboy. In several incidents tear gas was deliberately used in enclosed places. Ambulances were often prevented by security forces from carrying the wounded to hospital and doctors were threatened with dismissal if they treated the injured.

Widespread protests erupted in Bahrain following the arrest of Shaikh 'Ali Salman, a prominent and popular religious scholar, in December. His arrest coincided with the circulation of a petition signed by some 25,000 people calling on the Amir to allow the National Assembly (dissolved since 1975) to reconvene in accordance with the country's Constitution.

Two detainees, including 16-year-old Sa'id al-Iskafi, have died in custody and scores of others have been tortured under interrogation. As many as 4,000 people may have been arrested. While hundreds were later released, an unknown number are still in prison. Women and schoolgirls were also targeted for the first time and held incommunicado without charge or trial.

Scores of children, some as young as 10 years old, have been arrested and ill-treated in detention.

"Children under the age of 15 have been charged with offences such as incitement of hatred towards the government. Several were sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment," Amnesty International said.

The Government of Bahrain has denied the scale of violations committed in its name. The authorities tried to justify their strong-arm tactics in quelling the protests by pointing to acts of violence allegedly committed by protesters, including the killing of three police officials, blaming "extremist elements supported by foreign powers".

The government has also refused to release information on the identities of those arrested or even those released, and where they are being held. The vast majority are held incommunicado and denied access to their families, lawyers and doctors.

"The prisons and police stations became so overcrowded that makeshift detention centres were used to hold people," Amnesty International said.

About 150 detainees, both adults and children, have so far been convicted on charges connected with the protests and sentenced to terms of imprisonment ranging between six months and life. One defendant was sentenced to death for premeditated murder.

At least 80 detainees received grossly unfair trials held *in camera* before the State Security Court, which convicts on the basis of uncorroborated "confessions" routinely extracted under torture.

All the defendants were denied access to their lawyers until the day of their trial.

"Statements issued by the authorities about the validity of the charges against some defendants before their trials began may have seriously undermined their right to be presumed innocent," the human rights organization said.

The government has barred Amnesty International from the country. "We have repeatedly tried to send a delegation to Bahrain to investigate reports of human rights violations and to hold talks with officials but without success. Thousands of appeals sent by our members on behalf of victims remain without response," Amnesty International said.

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