

AI Index: PRE 01/322/2013
01 July 2013

EU must pressure Bahrain to free prisoners of conscience

Today EU and Gulf states officials are convening in Bahrain for their annual ministerial meeting just a few kilometres away from the jail where prisoners of conscience, including prominent opposition leaders and human rights activists, are being held.

Amnesty International fears that the EU foreign policy head, Catherine Ashton, and EU foreign ministers will not make full use of the opportunity to address the human rights situation in Bahrain or call publicly for the immediate release of all prisoners of conscience.

While the EU pledged to throw its “full weight behind advocates of liberty, democracy, and human rights throughout the world” raise human rights concerns at all bilateral meetings, the issue of human rights violations is neither on the agenda of this ministerial meeting with the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) nor properly addressed in EU statements.

“Bahrain is engulfed in a human rights crisis: the opposition is jailed, protests are repressed, torture is rife and impunity rampant. Yet, the Bahraini authorities prefer to invest in public relations rather than address their abysmal human rights record,” said Nicolas Beger, Director of Amnesty International’s European Institutions Office.

“It would be a slap in the face of many Bahrainis if EU officials were to visit Bahrain and not publicly call for the release of prisoners of conscience. Following a recent visit to Bahrain of the European Union Special Representative for human rights, the EU must not go on with business as usual and should seize this opportunity to press Bahrain on its human rights record”

At least 20 prisoners of conscience are currently behind bars in Bahrain two years after the 2011 peaceful anti-government protests which were brutally suppressed. These include 13 prominent opposition leaders such as Shaikh Hassan Meshaima’, Shaikh Abdelwahab Hussain, Dr Abdeljalil al-Singace, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, Ebrahim Sharif and Mahdi Abu Deeb as well as Nabeel Rajab, the well-known human rights defender. Some of them have been detained for life, solely for leading or calling for peaceful anti-government protests, including via social media.

Many of the prisoners of conscience were allegedly tortured in the first weeks of arrests. Some have been denied proper medical care and visits by their families and lawyers because of their refusal to wear prison uniforms which they regard as admission of guilt.

Children as young as 15 are tried as adults in Bahrain and put in prisons for adults, in violation of Bahrain’s obligations to treat all child suspects in accordance with the rules and principles of juvenile justice. Women have also been imprisoned. Zainab al-Khawaja, the daughter of prominent activist Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, has been jailed until at least February 2014 for her non-violent anti-government activities.

Human rights violations have largely remained unpunished and impunity prevails in the country. Of 96

alleged official investigations into torture and deaths protestors and detainees around the time of the 2011 protests, 46 cases have been dismissed due to lack of evidence, or because the death was considered to have been caused by “an act of legitimate self defence”.

No Bahraini senior security or army officer has been brought to justice. Only a handful of low-ranking security officers mostly of foreign origin, who were given Bahraini nationality, have been tried. Most were given lenient sentences and are free pending appeals.

The government regularly claims it is “still undergoing major reforms”. Last April, the Gulf kingdom cancelled a planned visit by the United Nations' torture expert for a second time. The Bahraini Human Rights Minister defended this decision by arguing that the visit could potentially negatively impact on the ongoing political dialogue. At the last session of the UN Human Rights Council, 43 states criticized ongoing human rights violations in Bahrain.