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Bahrain: Concern over the detention of human rights defender and closure of human rights centre

Following an initial communication with the Ambassador of Bahrain to London, Amnesty International wrote to His Majesty, Shaikh Hamad bin 'Issa Al Khalifa, the King of Bahrain on 28 September 2004, expressing concern over the detention of human rights defender, 'Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, Executive Director of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR).

Amnesty International is writing again to the government to express its concern over the summary closure of the BCHR. The BCHR was reportedly closed on the authority of the Ministry of Labour on 28 September 2004. According to reports received by Amnesty International, news about its closure was received by newspapers prior to the members or directors of the BCHR.

In its fax letter to Shaikh Hamad bin 'Issa Al Khalifa, Amnesty International expressed its concern that the statements attributed to 'Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja would be protected under international standards relating to freedom of opinion and expression, including the expression of opinions which may be controversial or critical of government. The organisation also sought clarification of the 45 day detention order reportedly set by the public prosecutor and details of the specific charges faced by 'Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja.

If 'Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja is being held solely in connection with the peaceful expression of his conscientiously held views, Amnesty International would consider him a prisoner of conscience and would call for him to be released immediately and unconditionally.

Amnesty International is concerned that the closure of the centre, along with the detention of 'Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, flies in the face of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and would have a negative impact on the development of human rights promotion and protection in Bahrain.

'Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja and members of the BCHR are human rights defenders entitled to full respect of their rights. Amnesty International has not received any information indicating that their activities were not in keeping with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders provides for the right "to complain about the policies and actions of individual officials and governmental bodies with regard to violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms..."

Amnesty International is also seeking assurances that the authorities will respect the confidentiality of the files maintained by the BCHR, in the interests of the safety of individuals regarding whom these files may contain information.

The authorities should carefully examine the provisions of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders in their consideration of the detention of 'Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja and the closure of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights.

