

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

14 December 2017

Index: MDE 22/7604/2017

Gulf dispute: Six months on, individuals still bear brunt of political crisis

Six months on since the onset of the political crisis in the Gulf region, ordinary people of multiple nationalities continue to pay the price, Amnesty International said today. The organization is calling on the governments of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to immediately lift arbitrary restrictions on population movement and to ensure there are transparent and operational mechanisms to enable Qatari nationals and foreign residents in Qatar to access the Holy Sites in Saudi Arabia.

To address the impact of family separation caused by the crisis, Amnesty International is also calling on Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE to remove discrimination against women in their citizenship laws, allowing them to automatically pass on their nationality to their children. The Qatari government should also ensure that any impacts on migrant workers' access to adequate food from the political dispute are minimized.

In [June 2017](#) the governments of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and Egypt severely restricted ties with Qatar as part of a political dispute. The sudden imposition of restrictions impacted thousands of families and individuals across the region who make-up a tight-knit social fabric cutting across national borders: splitting up families, interrupting students' education, threatening jobs, raising prices of staple foods in Qatar, and leaving residents of the region facing an uncertain future.

The GCC summit in Kuwait this month, which had raised hopes of some progress in the political deadlock, was cut short apparently with no progress made. While Amnesty International takes no view on the political dispute itself, the organization remains seriously concerned about its human rights impacts.

In late November, an Amnesty International delegation visited Doha to assess the human rights impact of the political crisis, interviewing 44 affected individuals and meeting with officials of the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs and Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, as well as the National Human Rights Committee.

Effect of movement restrictions on families of mixed nationality

On 5 June, the governments of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE ordered Qatari nationals to leave their territories within 14 days, and announced that all of their nationals had to return from Qatar, threatening penalties for anyone who did not return within this timeframe.

This had a significant and dramatic impact for families of mixed nationality. Under the nationality laws in the countries involved, women are not able to pass on nationality to their children and as such children inherit their father's nationality. This in itself is a violation of the rights to non-discrimination and equality.

Following significant international pressure around this issue during the summer of 2017, the states

involved introduced some measures to allow for family contact. As a result, travel is possible if people travelling from Qatar to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain or the UAE have managed to obtain a “laissez-passer” explaining the “humanitarian” reason for their visit. Such measures are clearly insufficient to address the human rights impact of the arbitrary, blanket measures on the region’s citizens imposed on 5 June.

Many of those affected said that they did not understand what the procedures to obtain a “laissez-passer” were and felt they were arbitrary and excessively demanding. There is scant to no information about the application process on official UAE and Saudi ministry websites, while on 31 October, [Bahrain imposed an entry visa requirement](#) for Qatari nationals and residents, which makes travelling to Bahrain even more difficult for families split across borders, as the Bahraini embassy in Qatar has been shut down since the crisis began. Affected families told Amnesty International that hotlines announced by the Bahrain, Saudi Arabian and UAE governments were difficult to access.

A Qatari woman with two young children and married to a Bahraini national told Amnesty International:

We did not try to visit Bahrain because we really do not understand what the procedures are. You need to have a laissez-passer. We are afraid to try and go to Bahrain because my husband and children might be banned from coming back to Qatar. My children are in schools here they cannot stop their education if Bahrain did not allow them to enter Qatar after the visit.

A Saudi Arabian woman married to a Qatari man told Amnesty International she hasn’t seen her elderly parents in six months: “I tried to go once. They turned me back [at the land border between Qatar and Saudi Arabia]. I tried calling the hotline. There was no answer.”

Even when people are able to obtain permission to visit relatives, they face lengthy and expensive travel across the region, as a result of the ban on direct flights between Qatar and Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE as well as the sporadic closure of the land border to Saudi Arabia.

One Qatari woman, separated from her Emirati husband, has only been able to visit her four children, including one autistic child, once since June when the political crisis began. She used to visit them every weekend before that. She explained to Amnesty International that in order to obtain the approval from the UAE Ministry of Interior, she needed to submit her children’s birth certificates, a statement of where she lives and works, where she would stay in the UAE, and proposed dates for travel. She said it took two weeks to obtain the permit.

I miss my children so much! I never missed any of their birthdays and any religious festival with them. I try to speak to family in the UAE [over the internet], but lately the lines are bad. When we get through, we are very careful as to what we say, only speak about how much we miss each other and hope that the crisis is resolved, nothing else.

The forced separation is particularly affecting the most vulnerable groups in society. One female Qatari teacher, married to a Bahraini who lives and works in Bahrain, spoke with Amnesty International about how this crisis has directly impacted her two children, both of whom have special needs:

My husband used to visit us every weekend, on the sixth day of the week he was home. And we used to spend our holidays in Bahrain. My children have special needs and the presence of their father was essential to their stability and wellbeing. We had a normal life and the children were happy when their father was around. Now he only comes home every 5 weeks because it is not only very

expensive but also very tiring and time consuming for him to travel very week.

He used to pay 500 riyals [\$136] for a 30 min trip from Bahrain, now the ticket's price is between 2500-3000 riyals [\$678 - \$814] and it takes him at least 10 hours to arrive.

My family, the stability of our house and wellbeing of my children were dismantled because of this crisis. I am scared to take them to Bahrain because they might ban my children to come back with me because they are Bahrainis.

A Qatari man, married to an Emirati woman, has not been able to meet his own baby daughter since her birth. He said he was afraid to go to the UAE in case he ran into any problems with the authorities, not to mention that his wife's family had also expressed their hostility towards him as a Qatari:

I have seen very little improvement to the situation since the beginning of the crisis. My wife gave birth to our daughter in the UAE six months ago and I have not yet seen my baby girl. My wife is under pressure from her family to divorce me.

A Saudi Arabian man, married to a Qatari woman and living in Qatar, said:

My mother is suffering from cancer and is being treated in Dammam. I was able to visit her by travelling via Kuwait. However over the past three months, my family has stopped contacting me from Saudi as the Ministry of Interior contacted my sister to check on me. I fear for them and avoid contacting them as they are under a lot of pressure from the authorities. I also face the issue of renewing my children's passports as the Saudi embassy has closed in Qatar... I have now applied for Dominican nationality... I hope this will help us.

Amnesty International urges Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and UAE to lift all arbitrary travel restrictions impeding the freedom of movement of Gulf nationals and residents. A state's power to regulate and restrict immigration is constrained by international human rights law, and differences in treatment between different categories of non-citizens can only be justified if they are necessary to achieve a legitimate objective. Arbitrarily splitting up families as part of immigration policies violates the right to family life.

Citizenship and family laws

Another concern that came to the fore is that of citizenship for children of non-Qatari fathers living in Qatar. In line with citizenship and family laws across the GCC, the children of Qatari mothers and non-Qatari fathers are currently not automatically entitled to citizenship. One Qatari widow, whose husband was Bahraini, said:

I come from a very mixed family - we are all spread out between Qatar, Bahrain and the UAE, and we need a sustainable and permanent solution to our problem. This crisis has created a climate of uncertainty especially for us women married to non-Qatari men. We are worried that at any time a decision [by the Bahraini authorities] asking our husbands and children to go back to Bahrain will be passed. If so what will happen to my family? I really wish I could pass the nationality to my children.

In August 2017 the [Qatari authorities announced](#) that the cabinet had approved draft legislation that that would among other things enable Qatari women to pass the right to permanent residency to their children. Such a law could potentially improve the situation for families of mixed nationality. However Amnesty International is calling on the Qatari government to go further and to remove discrimination against Qatari women in its citizenship laws, allowing them to automatically pass on

their nationality to their children.

Access to the Holy Sites in Saudi Arabia

According to officials of Qatar's Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, prior to June 2017, approximately 50,000 thousand Qataris and between 60,000 and 80,000 Qatari residents would visit the holy sites in Saudi Arabia annually.

In August, the Saudi Press Agency announced that [Qatari pilgrims would be permitted](#) to enter Saudi Arabia by land for Hajj. However, officials of Qatar's Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs told Amnesty International that since June, official Hajj and Umra operators in Qatar have been unable to arrange the formalities for pilgrims, making it challenging for Qatari nationals and foreign residents of Qatar to access the holy sites.

Amnesty International calls on the Saudi Arabian authorities to ensure that there are appropriate and sufficient mechanisms to enable pilgrims from Qatar to access the holy sites.

Freedom of expression

In June 2017 Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and UAE announced that they would treat criticism of the measures taken against Qatar or sympathy with Qatar or its people as a criminal offence, punishable by a prison term. Prosecuting anyone on this basis would be a clear violation of the right to freedom of expression. No one should be punished for peacefully expressing their views, including when criticizing a government decision.

In June a Bahraini lawyer was arrested after he filed a lawsuit against his government arguing that the measures taken against Qatar are unconstitutional and violate the rights of Bahraini citizens, then posted a copy of this complaint on his Facebook page. The Public Prosecution charged him with "inciting to hatred of the regime". He was released seven days later pending further investigation and the case remains in the hands of the prosecution.

In August the Saudi Arabian embassy in Kuwait lodged a complaint against Abdullah Saleh, a social media activist, who posted comments and videos commenting on the crisis while he was visiting Qatar. The Kuwaiti prosecuting authorities subsequently pressed criminal charges against him. His trial started in November in Kuwait in his absence, on charges of "committing a hostile act against a foreign state [Saudi Arabia] that endangered its political relations with Kuwait". The trial has been postponed to January. If convicted, he faces up to three years imprisonment. The authorities in Kuwait have issued a warrant for his arrest.

Such cases have created a climate of fear for some mixed families. A Qatari woman whose brothers live in the UAE told Amnesty International: "Our relatives are scared to speak to us even over the phone. The law does not allow them to sympathise with us. They are very reserved in the conversations we have, as if we were strangers."

Effects on migrant workers in Qatar

The political crisis has also impacted migrant workers in Qatar. As a result of blanket restrictions on trade with the country by its neighbours, Qatar has turned to new destinations to import food, which has had the effect of increasing food prices. [Data published by the Qatari government in November](#) shows that in October 2017 the price of food and drinks was 4.9% higher than in the same month in 2016.

For Qatar's large foreign workforce, the vast majority of whom are on low incomes, rises in the price

of food can have a serious impact. Representatives of the National Human Rights Committee told Amnesty International that these workers are disproportionately affected by these price rises than the rest of the population, because of their far lower salaries. Last month the Qatari government announced a temporary national minimum wage for migrant workers of 750 riyals (\$200) a month. A [government survey](#) published in 2014 found that the average Qatari household earned 88,200 riyals (\$24,164) per month.

Amnesty International spoke in October 2017 to a number of people who work to support the migrant worker population in Doha, who confirmed that for workers whose employers do not provide food directly but instead provide a monthly allowance to buy food, the rise in prices is having a negative effect on workers. One told researchers:

“Workers can either spend more on their food, and send less back home to their families to save or spend on necessities like education or their mortgage. Or they can save money on the food they buy, meaning their diet is not sufficient.”

While the price rises appear to have stemmed from trade restrictions applied by other states, Amnesty International is calling on the Qatari authorities to take steps to mitigate the effects of the price rises, including through subsidies, to ensure that any impacts on access to adequate food from the political dispute are minimized.