

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Bahrain: Respect human rights of prisoners and release prisoners of conscience

On the fourth anniversary of the arrests of 13 leading opposition activists and other prisoners of conscience in Bahrain, Amnesty International calls for their immediate and unconditional release and urges the authorities to ensure that the rights of all prisoners, including those held in Jaw prison, are fully respected.

Four years ago, starting on 17 March 2011, security officers in Bahrain raided the houses of several opposition activists, took them to unknown locations and detained them incommunicado for several weeks. Amongst them were 13 opposition activists, 'Ali al-'Ekri, a medical doctor, and Mahdi 'Issa Mahdi Abu Dheeb, the head of the Bahrain Teachers' Association.

Many of the 13 later said in court and to their relatives and lawyers that they were tortured during their first days of detention while they were being interrogated by officers from the National Security Agency (NSA). The torture they described included beatings, being forced to stand for extended periods, and being threatened with rape. After grossly unfair trials they were convicted of, amongst other offences, setting up "terror groups to topple the royal regime and change the constitution" and sentenced to between five years and life in prison. To date, no adequate investigation is known to have taken place into their allegations of torture, despite the authorities putting in place institutions since 2012 to investigate such allegations.

Some of the 13, as well as Mahdi 'Issa Mahdi Abu Dheeb, and other prisoners held in Jaw prison, have complained about the lack of adequate medical treatment and the deterioration in their health as a result of inadequate treatment for injuries resulting from torture.

During meetings with Amnesty International in 2014, the Bahraini authorities stated that adequate and specialised medical treatment is available at the Bahrain Defense Force (BDF) hospital. While Amnesty International understands that treatment at the BDF hospital is of an adequate standard, some prisoners have been reluctant to receive their treatment at that hospital because they allege that they were tortured there in 2011.

Referring to the 2011 events, the report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, which was set up by the King to examine allegations of human rights violations in the February-March 2011 anti-government protests, states that "[...] Detainees stated that they were taken to hospital for treatment and they were beaten and verbally abused during transfer and in the treatment facilities. This pattern was particularly common to detainees who were treated at BDF Hospital and the Mol Hospital in Al-Qalaa." (para. 1198)

On 2 March 2015 one of the 13 opposition activists, Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, started a hunger strike to demand, amongst other things, that he and his family have access to his medical records in order to allow him to get a second opinion by a medical professional outside the BDF hospital with regard to a surgical operation that has been recommended to him for injuries he sustained as a result of having been tortured in 2011.

Amnesty International calls on the Bahraini authorities to ensure that all prisoners have access to adequate and timely health care by independent doctors. In view of the fact that the Ombudsman for the Ministry of Interior has stressed in its 2013 report that the clinic at Jaw prison is not well equipped to provide specialised treatment, as well as the well founded lack of trust in the BDF hospital, steps should be taken to enable prisoners, especially those who allege they were previously tortured at the BDF hospital, to receive medical treatment in different hospitals or medical centres.

Amnesty International reiterates its calls on the Bahraini government to immediately and unconditionally release the 13 opposition activists, Mahdi 'Issa Mahdi Abu Dheen and Dr 'Ali al-'Ekri as they are prisoners of conscience. The organization also urges the authorities to ensure that independent and impartial investigations take place into their allegations of torture, that the victims have access to an effective remedy and reparation, that those found responsible are brought to justice in prompt and fair trials without recourse to the death penalty, and that the

outcome of the investigations are made public.

Recent abuses in Jaw prison

According to local activists and media reports, anti-riot police beat inmates and used tear gas inside Jaw prison on 10 March. The Ministry of Interior issued a statement on the same day claiming that the incidents had started when a visitor who wanted to see a prisoner without presenting an ID card was stopped by the security guards and family members of that visitor 'vandalized parts of the building' and prisoners had started a riot. The following day the government announced that an investigation into the incidents had been launched.

Since this incident, families of some prisoners have reported that communications with the prisoners have been interrupted and local activists have reported that prisoners continued being beaten after 10 March. Apparently other prisoners are being questioned in relation to the incidents on 10 March.

The previous month Amnesty International wrote to the Minister of Interior raising concerns about the denial of visits and phone calls to prisoners in blocks three and six in Jaw prison. Apparently the visits had been stopped after some prisoners had heard other prisoners in block six, some of whom are children, that is, under 18 years old, screaming and calling for help. The 13 opposition activists, then started a hunger strike on 18 February in protest at the treatment of prisoners in block six. Families told Amnesty International that visits were restored on 25 February.

Amnesty International is deeply concerned about the allegations of beatings of prisoners in Jaw Prison on 10 March, as well as of the use of tear gas in confined spaces. It is urging the authorities to make public the results of its investigations into the events on that day. It is likewise concerned about the allegations of ill-treatment of prisoners in block six, and that children are being detained alongside adult prisoners, in violation of international human rights law and standards, and is urging the authorities to launch investigations into these allegations also. The organisation is also calling on the authorities to ensure that prisoners in Jaw prison are not subjected to torture and other ill-treatment, and that any prison officials responsible for committing such acts are brought to justice.

Background:

The 13 prominent opposition figures, adopted by Amnesty International as prisoners of conscience and referred to in this statement, are: Hassan Mshaima', 'Abdewahab Hussain, Abdul-Hadi 'Abdullah Hassan al-Mukhodher, Ebrahim Sherif, Dr 'Abdel-Jalil al-Singace, Sa'eed Mirza, Salah 'Abdullah Hubail al-Khawaja, Mohammad Hassan Jawwad, Abdel-Jalil al-Miqdad, Mohammad Habib al-Miqdad, Abdullah al-Mahroos Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and Mohammad 'Ali Ridha Isma'il.

Mahdi Issa Mahdi Abu Dheeb and Dr Ali al-Ekri are also considered as prisoners of conscience.