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Amnesty International's first seminar on human rights in the Gulf

Transparency, accountability and independence of the judiciary were affirmed as vital safeguards for human rights protection by human rights experts and activists from the Gulf at an Amnesty International seminar in Kuwait last week.

The two day seminar on "Justice and Human Dignity" was the first to be held in the Gulf and was co-organised with the Kuwaiti Lawyers' Association and Amnesty International members in Kuwait. Participants included academics, human rights defenders, a range of women's rights activists, lawyers and included parliamentarians in Kuwait as well as experts from Egypt and Yemen.

The seminar produced a number of powerful recommendations concerning the role of women in decision-making, the role of judges and lawyers in the promotion and protection of human rights, independence of the judiciary and discriminatory laws affecting women and migrant workers.

Participants strongly reaffirmed their solidarity with initiatives by Kuwaiti women and other women's groups in the Gulf their efforts to obtain political rights.

Other recommendations stressed the importance of stepping up the dissemination and awareness of international human rights standards and to underline their consistency with Islamic principles regarding the independence and transparency of the judiciary and other human rights principles.

Recommendations also called for the establishment of an Amnesty International legal network for the Gulf and Arabian peninsula, urging Amnesty International and other human rights organizations to provide more training and seminars to further the awareness and protection of human rights and its defence in the region.

Background

Recommendations called for legislative provisions to safeguard independence of the judiciary, to ensure transparency and accountability in the administration of justice, urging that any attempt to intervene in the judicial process be made a criminally punishable offense.

Other recommendations called on Arab and Muslim governments to promulgate laws enabling women to participate fully in public life and to enjoy the same legal rights and responsibilities without discrimination, and the establishment of the necessary institutions to monitor the application of these laws. Participants urged Arab states to lift reservations on international human rights treaties, in particular those regarding women's political rights.

Amnesty International delegates also met with the Minister of Justice and officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Information Ministry. Amnesty International sought clarification regarding the current status of individuals still imprisoned following unfair trials under Martial Law provisions, following the Iraqi occupation in 1990 / 1991.

The human rights organization raised concerns regarding the continuing disenfranchisement of women and laws relating to the freedom of expression. These resulted in the imprisonment of the writer and academic Dr Ahmed Baghdadi in October 1999 and are currently being used against two women writers, Laila Othman and Alia Shuaib. Delegates attended a session of their trial before the Court of Appeal. Both are charged with demeaning [insulting] religion, and the publication of indecent material. A lower court had handed down six month jail sentences and the final verdict is due on 26 March. If the judgment results in imprisonment, both writers will be prisoners of conscience.

Discussions with the Minister of Education focussed on human rights education as a long term strategy to prevent human rights violations.

Talks were held with the chairs of the parliamentary committees for the Defence of Human Rights and Legislative and Legal Affairs and delegates also met with members of women's groups and prominent activists, the Graduates' Society and the Kuwaiti Society for Human Rights.

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