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## **Bahrain: Release leading rights activist at risk of death from hunger strike**

A leading Bahraini human rights defender serving a life sentence for his role in anti-government protests last year must be released immediately, Amnesty International said, amid fears the activist is at risk of death after 50 days on hunger strike.

Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja, 52, is a former protection co-ordinator with Frontline, an NGO which supports human rights defenders. He was arrested in April last year for being one of the leaders of anti-government protests. He was tortured in custody and sentenced to life imprisonment in a grossly unfair trial by a military court last June.

“Bahrain must ensure that Al-Khawaja is released immediately and unconditionally”, said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Director.

“The Bahraini authorities have made pledges that they would release people who were imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of expression, but the continued imprisonment of Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja demonstrates that they are not serious about fulfilling such promises.”

Amnesty International considers Al-Khawaja to be a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression.

He has not used or advocated violence in his participation in the anti-government protests, and no such evidence was shown by the authorities during the trial.

Al-Khawaja has not eaten for more than seven weeks in protest at his sentence and his family have told Amnesty International that he has now reduced his intake of glucose and minerals.

According to his lawyer, he has lost 16kg since his hunger strike began on 8 February.

Abdulahdi Al-Khawaja has also suffered from torture and other ill-treatment while in prison and police custody. According to his family, he was beaten during his arrest, taken away barefoot and not allowed to take his diabetes medication with him.

He was denied family visits until the first session of his trial in May, although his family reportedly spoke with him on the phone.

At his trial Al-Khawaja told the court how he was tortured in prison. As a result of severe beatings and other ill-treatment in prison he was admitted to the Bahrain Defence Force Hospital in April last year with a cracked jaw and skull and has had several operations on his head and face.

No independent investigation into his torture has yet been initiated.

The life sentence handed down by a military court in the capital Manama in June was upheld by the National Safety Court of Appeal, also a military court, in September 2011.

Al-Khawaja's appeal is set to be heard in Bahrain's Court of Cassation on 2 April.

Activists in Bahrain have repeatedly called for Al-Khawaja's release. Demonstrators in Manama attempted to stage a sit-in at a main highway on Monday, but were quickly dispersed by riot police.

Al-Khawaja, who is married with four daughters, is also a citizen of Denmark, where he lived in exile for decades. He returned to Bahrain after the government announced a general amnesty in 2001. Danish diplomats have visited him in prison several times and confirmed his deteriorating health.