

AI Index: PRE 01/217/2012
23 April 2012

Bahrain court delays 'toying with hunger striker's life'

The postponement of the appeals trial for 14 jailed opposition activists is toying with the life of prominent activist Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, who has been on hunger strike for 75 days in prison, Amnesty International said today.

In a hearing on Monday lasting just a few minutes, the Court of Cassation in Manama, Bahrain postponed the appeal until 30 April, apparently without giving any reason for the decision. This is the second postponement since the court started considering the case on 2 April.

The postponement comes after a protester died over the weekend during mass street demonstrations as the island kingdom hosted the Formula 1 Grand Prix – an investigation into his death has been opened.

“The Bahrain authorities' delaying tactics are toying with the life of Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, who is on death's doorstep as he enters his 75th day on hunger strike,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Middle East and North Africa Director at Amnesty International.

“He and the 13 other defendants in this case are prisoners of conscience, held solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression amid anti-government protests last year.”

The activist has said he intends to continue his hunger strike until he is released, yet no prospect of release is expected before 30 April, further heightening concerns for his life.

During Monday's hearing the court was fenced off and surrounded by security, and each defendant could only have their lawyers and one family member present.

None of the 14 defendants were in the court room.

Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, 52, is serving a life sentence for his role in anti-government protests last year. When his family last spoke to him on Sunday night he told them he is happy with his decision to remain on hunger strike and if it kills him, he “will at least be free”.

The hunger striker's daughter, Zainab Al-Khawaja, was again arrested on Saturday night during a protest at her father's ongoing imprisonment. She has been charged with disrupting traffic and insulting an officer and remains in detention.

Her lawyer informed her family that a decision in her case should be reached by Monday night. She has been able to speak to her family while in detention but the phone call was limited to one minute.

“The Grand Prix has come and gone but for the people of Bahrain, the media spotlight has moved on while Bahrain's authorities have yet to turn the corner on the human rights situation in the country,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.