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Bahrain: allegations of torture and ill-treatment must be independently investigated

Amnesty International has urged the Bahraini government to set up a prompt, impartial and independent investigation into allegations that well-known members of the country's Shi'a Muslim community arrested in recent weeks were tortured or otherwise ill-treated while being detained incommunicado.

Several detainees are reported to have complained that they were tortured when taken before the Public Prosecutor for questioning about alleged offences against Bahrain's security. On 28 August 2010 Mohammad Habib al-Miqdad, a Shi'a cleric who had been held since 15 August, told the Public Prosecutor that he had been suspended by the wrists for several hours and punched by security officials while he was detained reportedly at the headquarters of the National Security Agency in Bahrain's capital, Manama. His lawyer, who was allowed to observe but not participate directly when Mohammad Habib al-Miqdad appeared before the Public Prosecutor, has told Amnesty International that his client had visible marks on his body which appeared to have been caused by torture. Other detainees who have been held since mid-August are also reported to have alleged torture when they appeared separately and individually before the Public Prosecutor, including 'Abdul-Jalil al-Singace, 'Abdul-Ghani 'Ali 'Issa al-Khanjar and 'Abdul-Hadi al-Mokhoder..

'Abdul-Jalil al-Singace, a well-known member of al-Haq, an unauthorized political organization with support within Bahrain's Shi'a community, was arrested on 13 August 2010 at Bahraini International Airport when he returned with his family from a visit to the United Kingdom. His arrest sparked protests, some of which became violent, by supporters of al-Haq movement and was followed, within days, by the arrests of at least 11 other prominent members or supporters of al-Haq and other Shi'a political and religious groups. They were initially held incommunicado and denied access to lawyers but all 12 were subsequently taken before the Public Prosecutor between 27 and 31 August and formally charged with "forming an illegal organization" aiming to "overthrow the government and dissolve the constitution", inciting people to "overthrow and change the political system of the country", fundraising and planning terrorist acts, and other offences. The Public Prosecutor authorized their continued detention for two months under Article 27 of the 2006 Anti-Terrorism Law.

As yet, the Bahraini authorities have not disclosed the place or places of detention of the 12 detainees, even to their families and lawyers, and their families have been refused permission to visit them. They have been permitted access to their lawyers but, as yet, have not been permitted to speak to them in private despite repeated requests made to the Public Prosecutor. The lawyers have been permitted to meet their clients only in the Public Prosecutor's office and in the presence of officials. On 28 August the Public Prosecutor ordered a ban on reporting on the detention of the Shi'a opposition activists. Journalists and lawyers who publish or broadcast information about the case face prosecution and up to one year of imprisonment if convicted under Article 246 of Bahrain's penal code.

Amnesty International is urging the Bahraini authorities to investigate immediately, independently and thoroughly the torture and other ill-treatment allegations made by the detainees, to disclose their current whereabouts and allow them access to their families and to consult confidentially with their legal representatives. Amnesty International is also calling on the Bahraini authorities to ensure that any officials found responsible for torture or other ill-treatment or abuse of detainees' rights will be held fully to account.

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