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BAHRAIN: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL APPEALS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE OF PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE FOLLOWING MASS ARRESTS

In the wake of mass arrests following renewed clashes between protesters and security forces in Bahrain this month, Amnesty International last week called on the government to immediately release anyone jailed just for peacefully demonstrating.

“It is appalling that these demonstrators have been arrested simply for expressing their political opinions,” Amnesty International said.

In a letter to the Bahraini Government on 23 January, Amnesty International sought urgent assurances that all those detained are treated humanely and are allowed access to families, lawyers and medical attention if necessary. The organization also requested information about political detainees, including the charges against those accused of recognizably criminal offences, with assurances that they be given fair and prompt trials in accordance with international standards.

Reported mass arrests followed renewed clashes at the beginning of the month in many areas including Bani Jamra, Sitra, Jiddhafs and al-Sanabes, in which protestors demonstrated against the closure by security forces of a number of mosques where prominent Muslim Shi’a clerics had been calling on the government to restore democratic rights. In some cases, family members were held hostage as a way of coercing sought-after relatives to turn themselves in.

By 28 January, the government said it had arrested 180 people in connection with this month’s unrest, while opposition groups and lawyers said up to 2,000 people may have been held – most taken from their homes in dawn raids or from street check points. All are believed to be held incommunicado.

Among those held are eight Shi’a leaders and clerics who the government says it will try for “instigating and organizing violence”. The eight, who had been arrested during earlier unrest last year and released in September 1995, are Shaikh Abd al-Amir al-Jamri, Shaikh Hussein el-Deihi, Shaikh Ali bin Ahmed al-Jeddhafsi, Shaikh Ali Ashour, Shaikh Hassan Sultan, Sayyed Ibrahim Adnan al-Alawi, Hussein Meshema’a. Also detained on 22 January was Salah Abdallah Ahmed al-Khawaja who was freed a week earlier at the end of a seven-year sentence for political opposition.

BACKGROUND

In addition to the recent arrests, up to 600 remain held since last year’s unrest which began in December 1994. In January 1995, heavy clashes erupted when the government expelled seven Shi’a leaders who had been demanding a restoration of parliament and other democratic rights. At least 12

demonstrators were killed, and hundreds were held incommunicado for varying periods of time. Two detainees are known to have died in custody. Most of those who remained in detention have been held without charge or trial. Some have been tried and one, Issa Qambar, has been sentenced to death in an unfair trial.

Protests resumed in October 1995 with demands for the release of all detainees. They escalated from school and mosque sit-ins to clashes with security forces. The 600 detainees include students and school children as young as seven, some of whom were released after up to a week in detention without access to family or lawyers.

Amnesty International is concerned that the detainees continue to be held incommunicado and face the threat of torture. It is also concerned that trials at the State Security Court, which has tried many of the defendants, are unfair.

The organization has repeatedly written to the Government of Bahrain requesting permission for a fact-finding mission to visit the country and meet with government officials. There has been no positive answer to date.

Amnesty International's concerns and recommendations have been detailed in a report issued in September 1995, entitled *Bahrain: A Human rights Crisis*, which covered the December 1994 to April 1995 unrest.

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