

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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## **Bahrain's dark side – Empty promises while repression goes unabated**

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/bahrain-s-dark-side-empty-promises-while-repression-goes-unabated-2013-04-17>

With Bahrain about to host the 2013 Formula One Grand Prix, the spotlight has returned to the Gulf country's human rights record.

Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director, Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, talks about the crackdown against anti-government protesters following the uprising two years ago.

### **What's been happening in Bahrain?**

In 2011, thousands of people took to the streets in Bahrain – a small island nation in the Gulf – to demand political reform and more rights following a string of similar protests across the Middle East.

During the demonstrations in 2011 dozens of people were killed by the security forces. Thousands were arrested and many are still in detention. Others have been arrested in the past months and have allegedly been subjected to torture or other ill-treatment. Prisoners of conscience remain behind bars and the security forces continue using unnecessary or excessive force against protesters, which has resulted in two people killed so far this year.

This is the reality of the human rights situation in Bahrain, behind the gloss of reform, as the country prepares to host the Formula One Grand Prix.

### **How bad is the current human rights situation?**

An Amnesty International delegation visited Bahrain in January 2013 and confirmed reports that protesters face an ongoing crackdown. We collected reports of torture and other ill-treatment of protesters; the security forces' continued use of force in breach of international standards to forcibly disperse protesters; the harassment of activists and a complete lack of accountability for the human rights violations that have been committed over the last two years.

### **Is the situation getting better or worse?**

The situation hasn't really improved since the protests broke out two years ago and by and large those responsible, in particular higher up, have not been tried. The security forces continue to use unnecessary and excessive force, using shotguns and tear gas against protesters. The use of tear gas is particularly reckless.

At least 26 people have died in protests since November 2011, when the Independent Commission of Inquiry set up by the Bahrain government issued its report into the initial protests. Last September, 16-year-old Ali Hussein Neama died after riot police shot him in the back in the village of Sadad. His family said the police had threatened them and prevented them from approaching the boy as he lay on the ground. An official investigation closed the case, saying it had been an "act of self-defence" on the part of the security officer. The family has not had access to the investigation files.

### **Why should people care about the human rights situation in Bahrain?**

The human rights crisis in Bahrain is not over. Just this week, the authorities moved to jail people who offend the King for up to five years. The level of human rights violations in the

country, as well as the rampant impunity enjoyed by the security forces for these abuses, risk engulfing Bahrain in instability.

**What needs to be done now?**

The authorities should immediately and unconditionally release all those imprisoned solely for exercising their rights of freedom of expression, association and assembly. Other prisoners should be granted fair retrials in civilian courts or released. The authorities should allow people to protest peacefully and rein in the security forces by giving clear instructions to refrain from unnecessary and excessive use of force. They should ensure that independent, impartial and thorough investigations are conducted into all allegations of torture and other ill-treatment, deaths in custody and the killing of protesters, and bring to justice anyone responsible for these violations.

The authorities say the human rights situation has improved, yet they put restrictions on NGOs, including organizations such as Amnesty International, which is not allowed to be in Bahrain on weekends when most protests happen, and when the police resort to tear gas and the use of force.

**Who is most affected by human rights abuses?**

Most victims of violations have been from the country's majority Shi'a Muslim population. But anyone who expresses opposition to the ruling family is at risk of arbitrary arrest, ill-treatment or other abuses.

**Are children also being targeted?**

We have documented an increase in the number of children (under 18s) who have been arrested during protests. Many have been held in adult prisons or detention centres. Some have been tried in adult courts, instead of juvenile courts, and are currently serving their sentences in adult prisons. We have also received reports of children being tortured or ill-treated in custody.

**Is anyone being punished for the abuses taking place?**

There are very few investigations into allegations of torture and the killing of protesters. Only a few officers have been tried for alleged abuses.

Seventeen officers went on trial after being linked to the dozens of deaths since 2011 and at least 500 torture allegations documented in the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry report. Of those 17 officers, eight have already been acquitted of all charges, with six of them currently released on bail and on appeal.

**What are authorities doing?**

In November 2011, an Independent Commission of Inquiry set up by the Bahraini authorities released a report about abuses carried out during the initial protests. The authorities admitted abuses were committed and said they were reforming. Since then there have been some institutional changes, such as the creation of an ombudsman's office to receive complaints about abuses, CCTV cameras were installed in police stations and a code of conduct for police officers was introduced.

But the police continue to arrest people without warrants, detain them incommunicado for days or weeks at a time and deny them access to lawyers. We continue to receive reports of detainees being subjected to torture or other ill-treatment, including beatings, kicking, verbal abuse and threats of rape. Meanwhile, the security forces continue to use unnecessary and excessive force against protesters, which has resulted in two deaths this year. Prisoners of conscience remain behind bars and true justice for victims of human rights violations remains elusive.

**What about the UK Foreign Affairs Committee's enquiry into Bahrain?**

The UK Foreign Affairs Committee launched an inquiry last year into the Foreign &

Commonwealth Office's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The inquiry touches on many subjects, including human rights, and has already received a large number of submissions on human rights abuses. It is essential that this inquiry puts the human rights situation of Bahrain back on the agenda, and that the UK government takes the results seriously.

#### **How should other countries react to the events in Bahrain?**

The US Government, and other countries with special ties with Bahrain, should condemn the current human rights violations and press the Bahraini government on human rights issues. They should not export security and military material which could be used to commit human rights abuses. They should insist that the government implements effective human rights reforms and that victims of human rights violations receive justice and full reparations.

#### **At a Glance**

Human rights in Bahrain

At least 46 people died during protests between February and November 2011, a further 26 have been killed since November 2011

More than 500 allegations of torture or other ill-treatment were received by the BICI in 2011

Seventeen policemen have gone on trial. Eight have already been acquitted.

At least 80 children are currently held in adult prisons

Amnesty International has adopted 20 individuals as prisoners of conscience.

According to the Bahrain Watch, the Bahraini government has recently spent at least US\$32 million on public relations firms since February 2011

#### **Related links**

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<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/crackdown-and-hollow-promises-ahead-bahrain-grand-prix-2013-04-17>

News, 17 April 2013

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<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE11/005/2013/en>

Report, 14 February 2013

Bahrain: Still paying a heavy price for freedom

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/bahrain-still-paying-heavy-price-freedom-2013-02-13>

Story, 14 February 2013

Bahrain: Flawed reforms: Bahrain fails to achieve justice for protesters

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE11/014/2012/en>

Report, 17 April 2012

Bahrain: Human rights in Bahrain - Media briefing

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Media Briefing, 13 April 2012