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‘Don’t forget Nabeel Rajab’ – Don’t forget basic rights of Bahrainis

The Bahraini authorities must respect freedom of expression and assembly during a week of demonstrations planned to protest against the imprisonment of human rights defender, Nabeel Rajab, said Amnesty International.

The human rights defender was imprisoned in August 2012 for three years for calling for and participating in ‘illegal gatherings’. His sentence was reduced to two years in December - Amnesty International has adopted him as a prisoner of conscience.

Organizers of the ‘don’t forget Nabeel Rajab’ campaign sought official permission to demonstrate on 23 March but had their application flatly rejected by the authorities. Despite fears of excessive use of force by the security forces to disperse the protest, organizers still plan to go ahead.

“The government of Bahrain has demonstrated time and again its disregard for basic human rights. Not only is Nabeel Rajab unfairly imprisoned, the authorities are now trying to silence his supporters and family,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

“The authorities cannot use the excuse that demonstrations are not officially authorized to quell protest.”

This latest ban is part of a broader pattern of aggressive handling of protests by the Bahraini authorities which has resulted in unlawful killings and arbitrary detention.

In February, the security forces opened fire on demonstrators calling for greater freedoms resulting in the death of Hussein Ahmad al-Jazairi, 16, who was shot at close range during a protest close to Daih village and Mahmoud ‘Issa Mohammed, 20 who was hit in the head with a tear gas canister during protests in Nabeh Saleh village.

Violent clashes erupted in March between security forces and demonstrators across Bahrain resulting in injuries on both sides.

“By now the authorities should know better. Resorting to excessive force will not stop people speaking out nor will bureaucracy – imposing a law that demands permission for all public gatherings.”

Organizers of rallies have complained to Amnesty International that they have submitted their requests in advance to the head of Public Security only to have their applications rejected – disturbance to traffic is one of the main reasons given by the authorities.

“The Bahraini authorities need to come up with alternatives not bans. In light of tomorrow’s planned demonstration, security forces must refrain from excessive use of force or carrying out arbitrary arrests.”

Amnesty International reiterates to the Bahraini authorities that they should immediately release Nabeel Rajab and other prisoners of conscience.