

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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LETTER TO FORMULA ONE RAISING BAHRAIN HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS

Dear Chase Carey,

CC. Stefano Domenicali, incoming CEO of F1; Jean Todt, President of the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile; Lewis Hamilton, F1 Champion; Jean-Frédéric Dufour, Rolex CEO

We, the undersigned organisations, are writing to express our concerns about the decision by Formula 1 to resume racing in Bahrain following the postponement of the Bahrain Grand Prix in March due to the Covid-19 pandemic, despite continuing abuses against protestors who oppose the event. The Grand Prix has become a flashpoint for protestors who see the event as 'sportswashing' Bahrain's worsening human rights situation, and proceeding with the event without taking steps to protect the right to peacefully protest it, including publicly opposing abuses against protestors, risks making sportswashing a reality.

ABUSES LINKED TO THE BAHRAIN GRAND PRIX SINCE 2011

Since the suppression of Bahrain's Arab Spring uprising in 2011, the Bahrain Grand Prix has become a focal point of popular protest, and serious human rights abuses have been committed by Bahraini security forces against protestors, including the murder of Salah Abbas, who was arrested, assaulted, and shot dead on the eve of the 2012 race. The human rights implications of the Grand Prix were recognised in 2014 by the National Contact Point (NCP) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), who stated in response to a human rights complaint that the event had become "politicised" and "recommended that the new risk warrants updated or ongoing due diligence to mitigate the human rights risks linked to the race."

Despite F1's decision to adopt a human rights policy in 2015, violations linked to the Bahrain Grand Prix have continued. As you are no doubt aware, in 2017, Bahraini activist Najah Yusuf was tortured, sexually assaulted and sentenced to three years in prison after posting criticism of the Grand Prix on social media. While Najah was released by royal pardon in August 2019 following sustained international pressure, she was subsequently fired from her public sector job and will live with the psychological impacts of her ordeal forever.

In October last year, F1 promised to raise Najah's case with Bahraini authorities after the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention declared her imprisonment to be "arbitrary" and called for her to be accorded an "enforceable right to compensation and other reparations." However, over a year later Najah has received neither justice nor compensation, with no indication that F1's interventions on her behalf have been effective, or even taken place at all.

Furthermore, her 17-year-old son, Kameel Juma Hasan, is now facing over 20 years in prison on a series of dubious charges apparently related to his participation in opposition demonstrations. Amnesty International has asserted that "his prosecution and imprisonment have been taken in reprisal against his mother," after he and Najah refused to act as informants for the security services, adding that "official pursuit of Kameel became more aggressive as Najah continued to speak out about her own ordeal."

WORSENING HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN BAHRAIN

In addition to unresolved human rights issues linked to the race, we are equally concerned that Bahrain's government is using the positive publicity surrounding the race to 'sportswash' their dismal human rights record. As Human Rights Watch argued in their 2020 World Human Rights Report, the human rights situation in Bahrain has worsened considerably in recent years.

Since 2017, Bahrain has witnessed a more than ten-fold increase in executions, and at least 25 death row inmates currently face imminent execution, nearly half of whom were convicted on the basis of confessions extracted under torture. Bahrain's prisons remain overcrowded and unsanitary, with political prisoners routinely subjected to humiliating treatment and denied adequate medical care, in violation of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, also known as the Mandela Rules. At Jau Prison, a mere 7 miles from the Bahrain International Circuit,

authorities routinely fail “to provide adequate medical care to high-profile prisoners,” including elderly political leaders like Hassan Mushaima and Abduljalil Al-Singace, jeopardizing their lives.

The arbitrary revocation of citizenship also remains a pressing human rights concern in Bahrain. Hundreds of individuals, including journalists, activists and leading opposition figures, remain deprived of citizenship. This includes Sayed Ahmed Alwadaei, the director of the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD), whose brother-in-law Sayed Nizar remains imprisoned in what the UN describes as “acts of reprisal” for his human rights activism.

Furthermore, freedom of expression, assembly and association in Bahrain have been severely curtailed and all political opposition parties and independent media have been shut down. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), at least six journalists are currently imprisoned for their work, and Bahrain has fallen to 169/180 on Reporters Without Borders (RSF) 2020 World Press Freedom Index, making Bahrain a leader in repression of human rights.

INTENSIFIED CRACKDOWN SINCE COVID-19

Concerningly, the Bahraini government has seized the opportunity provided by the coronavirus pandemic to tighten their grip over the country. Since March, authorities have further cracked down on citizens’ online activity, targeted top defence lawyers with vexatious prosecutions and introduced legislation outlawing criticism of government policy; at least 40 people have been arbitrarily detained since the start of the pandemic.

In November alone, the month of the Bahrain Grand Prix, 18 individuals were arrested for commenting on the death of Bahrain’s prime minister, including a 16-year old girl, a 14-year old boy and respected TV producer Yasser Nasser. Furthermore, on 3 November over 50 individuals were sentenced in a mass trial marred by torture and due process violations, according to research conducted by BIRD.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the abuses connected to the Grand Prix, we are concerned by F1’s decision not only to continue racing in the country without taking measures to address those abuses, but also to increase the number of races taking place in the country with the introduction of the Rolex Sakhir Grand Prix. Bahrain’s government calls itself the “The Home of Motorsport in the Middle East” and has consistently pointed to the Bahrain Grand Prix to project an image of normalcy to curate the country as a regional sports and entertainment hub.

The decision to postpone the Bahrain Grand Prix in March to ensure the safety of drivers, staff and patrons was a sensible decision. However, it is high time that F1 demonstrated the same concern for the Bahraini people, who are facing the pandemic amidst a renewed government crackdown. By increasing F1’s presence in the country at this volatile time, without effective measures to end the abuses connected to the Grand Prix, you risk performing invaluable PR for Bahrain’s government and risk further normalising the violation of human rights in the country. We thus urge you to use your considerable leverage to:

- Secure justice, accountability and compensation for victims of abuses linked to the Bahrain Grand Prix, including Najah Yusuf and the family of Salah Abbas;
- Ensure that individuals who peacefully express their right to criticise the race are protected from prosecution; and
- Enact your human rights policy to ensure that your business practices are not contributing to human rights abuses in Bahrain.

We hope you will treat this letter with the gravity the situation warrants.
Yours sincerely,

1. ACAT-France (Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture)
2. Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)
3. Amnesty International
4. Article 19
5. Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD)
6. CIVICUS
7. Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
8. European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (ECDHR)

9. Football Supporters Europe
10. Freedom House
11. Human Rights Watch
12. International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)
13. International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
14. OMCT
15. Reprieve
16. Transparency International Germany
17. World Players Association