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BAHRAIN: GOVERNMENT TAKES NO STEPS TO STOP HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

Amnesty International said today that hundreds of political opponents in the Gulf state of Bahrain have been arbitrarily arrested, jailed and often tortured over the years - and the government has taken no concrete steps to stop the pattern of repression.

"Some people have been detained for up to seven years without ever being charged or going to trial," Amnesty International said. "And those who do go to court often find their trials are blatantly unfair."

In a report released today, the organization details the incommunicado detention, torture and unfair trials of political prisoners in recent years, and says that members of the majority Shi'a community have been particularly targeted for arbitrary arrest. As recently as this March, Shi'a clerics were arrested after participating in peaceful demonstrations.

Last August, following the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, a number of long-term political detainees were released, but arbitrary arrests have continued since then. Some dozen people were detained for opposing the United States' and British presence in Bahrain and families of Bahraini nationals were arrested and later expelled after they returned from Kuwait following the occupation.

At the end of March this year, there were more than 100 political detainees and prisoners still behind bars, some having been there for nearly ten years. Many were accused of belonging to Islamic political opposition groups. Most, if not all, were imprisoned after unfair trials and a number of them may be prisoners of conscience.

"All of them have been arrested under laws so broad that any criticism of the government can land one in administrative detention literally for years," Amnesty International said. "And virtually every prisoner we've talked to said that torture is routine during interrogation."

The organization said the arrests are not limited to the suspected critics themselves. Relatives of government opponents and students studying abroad are often arrested and detained for interrogation when they return to Bahrain.

Even children have been jailed as political suspects while others were detained with their families for several weeks last year when they came back to Bahrain after years living elsewhere. The fathers of these children - some as young as ten years old - are serving long prison terms in connection with an alleged coup attempt in 1981.

The organization said a number of political detainees were released last August - but even they had spent up to two years in jail in some cases without ever being charged. Other political prisoners were released in March, most of them having completed their prison terms.

"While we welcome the releases of these prisoners, we're concerned that the laws and practices that allow arbitrary arrests and torture remain unchanged," Amnesty International said.

In a country where opposition parties are illegal, many of those arrested have been accused of having ties with opposition groups, usually Islamic. A Sunni religious scholar, Nidham Ya'qubi, was arrested in August last year for allegedly criticizing the government in a

mosque and since his release has been banned from preaching in mosques.

Amnesty International's report says that political suspects are routinely tortured in police stations, detention centres and prisons. Former prisoners have said that police officers and prison guards have beaten prisoners with cables, extinguished cigarettes on their flesh, and forced them to stand upright sometimes for days. There are also reports that detainees have been forced to eat a lizard, had a limb drilled, or been threatened with sexual assault or execution.

Amnesty International said it knows of six political prisoners who reportedly died in prison, allegedly from torture and/or medical neglect. As is the case with most torture reports, there has been no impartial judicial investigation into these deaths.

For many detainees, the torture was designed to get them to make confessions which were later used to convict them or to give information about other political activists. But others are tortured to get them to cooperate with the authorities and often to turn them into informants.

In Bahrain, political cases are tried before the Supreme Civil Court of Appeal; trials before this court fall far short of international standards for fairness. The court usually appoints lawyers for the defence and defendants only get to see their lawyer shortly before the trial begins. Witnesses do not have to be called to give evidence for the prosecution and there is no right of appeal.

In one case that went to trial in 1990, witnesses for the prosecution said they had been pressured - including being tortured into testifying that the people on trial had tried to recruit them as members of an unauthorized organization, Hizbollah. They withdrew their evidence in court and the defendants themselves denied that any such organization existed. Five received prison terms ranging between six months and ten years and four were acquitted.

Despite frequent claims by defendants that confessions were made after torture, Amnesty International knows of no impartial investigation ever being initiated to look into the allegations.

The organization is calling on the government to take steps to prevent torture, including investigating allegations of torture and bringing those responsible to justice. It is also urging the revision of the 1974 law allowing administrative detention for up to three years and other laws to bring them into line with international standards on human rights.

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