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Bahrain urged to allow peaceful protest

The Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society was denied permission to hold the gathering called "Our Demands are Legitimate" in the northern town of Jablat Hibshi this evening.

In the past few weeks the Bahrain government has banned all other rallies and gatherings organized by the opposition groups.

Previous rallies organized by opposition groups and not authorized by the government have been met with the excessive use of force against protesters by security forces.

"Despite recent promises of reform and the guarantee of basic human rights, the authorities continue to violate the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly and have publicly announced that any gathering today would be illegal," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Deputy Programme Director.

Talking about today's ban the Chief of Public Security Major-General Tariq Al Hassan said that Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society had submitted a request to the Directorate of the Northern Governorate Police to hold a rally in Jablat Hibshi on Thursday.

He said that after reviewing the security plans and the law on public assemblies, it was decided not to grant permission for the rally. He added that the location and timing of the proposed rally would have meant that traffic would have been hindered and public would have been exposed to risks, without specifying the risks.

The Chief of Public Security also clarified that it was illegal to take part in the rally and legal action would be taken against violators.

"Instead of continuing to arbitrarily deny the right to peaceful assembly on the grounds that traffic might be disturbed, the authorities must offer alternatives to allow political societies and the general population to peacefully exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

A gathering organized by the five main opposition political groups on 22 June went ahead despite being banned by the government. The gathering was attacked by security forces and several people were wounded including the al-Wefaq Secretary General and other party members.

In the same gathering on 22 June, a young man, Ali al-Mowali, was wounded after a tear gas canister hit his head causing severe injuries. He was immediately transferred to intensive care where he has remained until now. On 9 July he reportedly underwent an operation.

Other Bahraini human rights groups reported dozens of arrests of protesters in June. Several of those arrested were accused of taking part in an illegal gathering. Dozens more have reportedly been injured as a result of excessive use of force during protests in the past weeks.

"The fact that a peaceful protest has not been granted an official permit does not justify arbitrary arrest or the unnecessary or disproportionate use of force by police against protesters. The Bahraini authorities should act immediately to ensure that this does not happen and that the law on gathering is brought in line with international law," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

During the review of Bahrain at the 13th session of the Universal Periodic Review Working Group before the Human Rights Council in Geneva last May, Bahrain received 25 recommendations to amend national legislation, including to amend Law 32 of 2006 on associations and gatherings and bring it in line with international standards. Several states put forward recommendations calling on the Bahraini government to allow the exercise of freedom of expression, association and

assembly.
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