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Bahrain military court finds medics guilty

A military court in Manama today found a group of doctors and other health workers guilty of attempting to topple the government during protests earlier this year, in what Amnesty International said was a travesty of justice.

At a seven-minute court session, the president of the military-run National Safety Court of First Instance read the names of the 20 defendants, announced the guilty verdicts and imposed prison sentences of up to 15 years.

Bahraini authorities have accused the group of using Manama's Salamaniya Medical Complex, where they worked, as a "control centre" for pro-reform protests at nearby GCC Roundabout (formerly Pearl Roundabout), in February and March. The defendants deny all the charges, which include incitement to hatred of the regime, occupying the hospital by force, stealing medicines and stockpiling arms at the hospital.

"These are simply ludicrous charges against civilian professionals who were working to save lives amid very trying circumstances," said Philip Luther, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme. "It appears that the real reason for targeting these health workers was the fact that they denounced the government crackdown on protesters in interviews to international media."

"We've repeatedly said that Bahraini authorities should never have used military courts to prosecute ordinary civilians, including doctors, teachers and human rights activists.

Today's court session was attended by several lawyers for the medics, as well as observers from foreign embassies and Bahraini human rights NGOs. The defendants, who were previously released on bail, and their families were not present to hear the verdict.

A lawyer for the health workers has said the group will appeal the verdict next Sunday before the High Court of Appeal, in Bahrain's civilian justice system.

Other military trials in Bahrain this week have upheld guilty verdicts and harsh jail terms – including life sentences – for human rights activists and teachers on charges related to the protests earlier this year.

"The ruling government clearly wants to send a message that anybody perceived as advocating political reforms will be dealt with severely," said Philip Luther.