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BAHRAIN: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR HALT TO TRIALS AND ACCESS TO THE COUNTRY

Amnesty International said today that State Security Court trials of people arrested during recent protests are unfair and should be stopped.

"No one should be brought before the court until the defendants' right to a fair and public trial is respected", Amnesty International said. "That will only happen when the court lives up to international standards for fair trial".

The organization's call comes in the wake of the first sentences passed by the State Security Court in recent days: 16 defendants were sentenced to between three and 10 years' imprisonment on charges including sabotage and membership of a prohibited organization, *Hizbullah*. Other people are due to be tried on similar charges in the coming weeks.

All of these people were arrested following protests, which began in December last year, calling for the restoration of democratic rights.

The defendants were held incommunicado and denied access to defence lawyers until the start of the trials, and they have no right of appeal against their convictions and sentences to a higher tribunal. In addition, information reaching Amnesty International from former detainees suggests that some of the defendants, including Hussain 'Ali al-Tattan and Salman 'Abdullah al-Nashaba, were tortured to extract "confessions" from them, which the organization fears may have been used to convict them.

Amnesty International has still had no response to its request to the government to send observers to these trials, which are being held in camera. In the past, this special court has relied on uncorroborated "confessions" as the basis for conviction.

"We are calling on the government to provide us with copies of all relevant records concerning the trials, including the charge sheets, medical records, records of any investigations of complaints of torture or ill-treatment, transcripts and judgments", Amnesty International said.

The government's crackdown on protestors has continued in the past month, while Amnesty International's requests to visit the country to investigate human rights violations have been ignored.

"Recent statements by government officials that the protesters have been handled 'with patience and self-control' belie the reality of the situation in Bahrain, where evidence mounts of human rights violations unprecedented in recent years," Amnesty International said.

The government has refused to consider the protesters' demands or even to receive petitions on their behalf, resorting instead to the use of force. It has stated that "extremist elements" were responsible for sabotaging private and public property and killing three policemen in recent months.

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While Amnesty International recognizes the state's right to bring to justice people responsible for acts of violence, this cannot justify the killing of at least 11 civilians by security forces using live ammunition, in circumstances suggesting that they may have been extrajudicially executed. The government has so far failed to take any steps to prevent such killings or to investigate them.

- Recent information received by Amnesty International includes:
- ◆ **Three civilians were shot dead** by the security forces in April. The most recent victim was 18-year-old Hussain 'Abdullah 'Ali al-'Ashiri who, according to eyewitnesses, was shot in the head during protests in al-Dair on 11 April. He died eight days later after going into a coma. Two others were shot dead on 1 April in Bani Jamra when security forces placed Shaikh 'Abd al-Amir al-Jamri, a prominent Shi'a Muslim religious scholar and member of the former National Assembly, and his family under house arrest. Shaikh al-Jamri was later transferred to an undisclosed location. His fate and whereabouts remain unknown.
 - ◆ Unconfirmed estimates suggest **several thousand people have been arrested**. The government has rejected such claims as "exaggerated" yet refuses to disclose the names of detainees, their whereabouts and, with few exceptions, has denied them access to their families. The government has even refrained from making public the names of detainees which it says have been released. The Ministry of Interior, for example, announced on 17 April that 120 political detainees have been released, but their identities and dates of release have been withheld. **The official prisons are believed to be severely overcrowded**, and that makeshift detention centres are now being used to hold detainees, including a disused sports stadium in Madinat 'Issa.
 - ◆ **Women and children** are among those arrested, sometimes in lieu of relatives wanted by the authorities. The names of at least 43 detained minors aged between 10 and 16 have reached Amnesty International. Among the women now held is Nazi Karimi, a university student who has been on hunger strike since her arrest on 9 April. Held in solitary confinement in Madinat 'Issa, she is reportedly being put under pressure to "confess" to her alleged participation in recent protests. Both she and her relatives are reportedly threatened with forcible exile.
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