

September 28, 2011

To: Members of the House and Senate

We are writing to urge you to take immediate action to block a proposed arms sale to Bahrain until it ends abuses against peaceful protesters and takes meaningful steps toward political reform and accountability for recent and ongoing serious human rights violations.

The Pentagon notified Congress on September 14 that it proposed to sell \$53 million of armored Humvees and anti-tank missiles to Bahrain. This sale is the first proposed by the USG since the Government of Bahrain cracked down on hundreds of thousands of people peacefully demanding greater political freedom in February.

Since that time, Bahraini security forces have continued to brutally suppress protests and undertaken a relentless program of retribution. In the face of this reality, it is disappointing that the DOD's press release on this sale justifies it by referring to the Government of Bahrain as "an important force for political stability and economic progress in the Middle East."

This prioritization of security interests over political reform stands in stark contrast to President Obama's declaration of support in May to those protesting for freedom throughout the region, when he said: "If you take the risks that reform entails, you will have the full support of the United States."

The people of Bahrain have taken those risks for reform. Relative to the country's size, the protests in Bahrain in February were the largest of the Arab Spring and included a broad cross-section of society. The authorities quickly responded by opening fire on peaceful protesters, killing seven and wounding hundreds. In mid-March, after several weeks of continuing protests, the government declared a "state of national safety" which put the Bahrain Defense Force (BDF), the recipient of the proposed arms delivery, in charge of suppressing the largely peaceful protests.

In the fierce crackdown that has followed, more than 40 people have been killed by security forces – including at least four in custody from torture and medical neglect - and more than 1,600 people have been arrested. Authorities then initiated a large-scale campaign of retribution against anyone supporting or participating in protests, including arrests and detentions of internationally respected human rights activists, medical professionals who protested government restrictions on treating injured protesters, journalists and bloggers reporting on protests, and union activists and other workers calling for a boycott to address grievances in the workplace. In a matter of weeks, more than 2,500 employees were fired from their jobs, and more than 40 Shi'a mosques and religious sites were destroyed.

A special military court established under the decree has convicted more than 100 people, most of them for patently political offenses such as criticizing the ruling al-Khalifa family. Leading political opposition figures, human rights defenders, and civil society activists have been sentenced to unduly long prison terms, in some cases for life, solely for their role in organizing the large street protests; their trial record does not link them in any way to acts of violence or any other recognizable criminal offense.

U.S. officials have called for dialogue in Bahrain and declared that violence is "not the answer," and in May, President Obama condemned "mass arrests and brute force" by the Bahraini government. In his speech before the United Nations General Assembly on September 21, however, President Obama stopped noticeably short of criticizing the extensive and serious Bahraini human rights violations, claiming that Bahrain had taken steps toward reform and accountability, and noting only that "more are required."

In fact, the Government of Bahrain has taken no meaningful steps toward accountability or political reform. And if their primary external ally resumes arms sales as though circumstances had returned to normal, Bahrain's rulers will have no reason to do so. Moreover, people across the Middle East will not take U.S. statements about democracy and human rights in the region seriously when, rather than hold its ally Bahrain to account, it appears to reward repression with additional weapons.

We urge you to speak out immediately and take meaningful action to block this sale. Under Section 36 of the Arms Export Control Act, we request that you and other members of Congress pass a joint resolution of disapproval to prohibit the proposed sale. We encourage you to seek a detailed justification from the Administration for the proposed sale. In addition, you should request a formal briefing from the Department of State on how this sale will affect the process of political reform and accountability for serious human rights violations in Bahrain, and how this sale will affect public sentiment toward the United States and its presence in Bahrain.

Sincerely,



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