

Bahrain: A Tortuous Process

July 2011

In early May, when the U.S. government had said little to criticize the violent crackdown against pro-democracy protests in Bahrain, Human Rights First embarked on a fact-finding mission to document the violence and provide recommendations to the U.S. and Bahraini governments. We released our findings and recommendations in a report entitled [Bahrain: Speaking Softly](#). Some of the earlier report's recommendations to the U.S. government have been enacted in part or in whole ([see Conclusions and Recommendations](#)).

This report is based on research conducted by Human Rights First during a second fact-finding mission to Bahrain, from July 6 to July 12. Our findings are derived from in-person interviews with human rights defenders and activists, victims of human rights violations and their families, dozens of recently-released detainees, eyewitnesses to protests and clashes, journalists, students, medical practitioners, Bahraini government representatives, and others.

While in Bahrain, a Human Rights First staff member witnessed riot police firing on unarmed women without warning with a variety of weapons.

This report is not intended as a comprehensive survey of all human rights violations in Bahrain since mid-February, but includes illustrative cases and recommends actions the U.S. and Bahraini governments should take to address the crisis.

It updates information and recommendations included in [Bahrain: Speaking Softly](#), which catalogued case studies of arbitrary arrests, torture, and deaths in and out of custody.

While the Bahraini government has prevented a reoccurrence of the mass protests of February and March, when tens of thousands of people demonstrated, the country remains tense and small acts of resistance continue in the face of ongoing government brutality. "Free Bahrain" graffiti is scrawled on walls in some villages. At night, masked pro-democracy teens build makeshift barricades and use aerosol horns to blare a four-beat rhythm across neighborhoods in imitation of the anti-monarchy chant of "Down, Down Hamad." Marches involving hundreds of protestors continue, and are attacked by riot police using sound bombs, tear gas, and rubber bullets. Sectarian divides have widened and intensified, making reconciliation even more difficult.

As one young activist told Human Rights First, "Keeping silent is the worst thing anyone can do. Older people tend to be more risk averse so I felt I had to do this [human rights activism]. People get arrested at checkpoints for nothing, depending on the mood of the policeman. If I get arrested, at least I want it to be for something humanitarian. I go to protests. It feels right that I do this; it makes me feel less helpless. Even if we know we'll be attacked we have to show the authorities and the world we're not giving up."

Overview

On February 14, 2011, inspired by the Arab Spring elsewhere in the Middle East, reform protests began in Bahrain, the smallest country in the region, and home to the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet. Most of the protestors were Shiite Muslims, members of the branch of Islam to which most Bahrainis belong, but there were significant numbers of Sunni Muslims too in the early days of the protests. Their protests concentrated on the Pearl Roundabout area of the city.

The protesters demanded elections, democratic reform and an end to discrimination against Shiites in employment and other areas of Bahraini life. The Al Khalifa royal family has ruled Bahrain since independence from Britain in 1971. Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, the world's longest-serving unelected prime minister, has held that post for forty years. King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, ruler since 2002, studied at the U.S. Army Command and Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

During the protests, some pro-government demonstrators, mostly from the minority Sunni community, organized competing rallies. The Bahraini government broke up the reform protests in a crackdown marked by excessive force, and at least seven people were killed. The security forces withdrew from the Pearl Roundabout on February 18, the demonstrators reclaimed the area, and the protests resumed.

Some started to call for more radical reforms, including an end to the monarchy.

In mid-March the government imposed a State of National Safety, and around 1,000 troops from neighboring Saudi Arabia arrived in Bahrain to assist in restoring order. The Bahraini security forces stormed protestors at the Pearl Roundabout area for the second time, and cleared the demonstrators in a large show of force. At least two protestors and two policemen were killed, and scores were injured by the security forces.

A severe crackdown ensued, involving arbitrary arrests, disappearances, torture, attacks on Shiite religious sites, show trials in military courts, large numbers of people suspended or fired from their

jobs, at least four deaths in custody, and a number of other civilian deaths on the street under suspicious circumstances.

On June 1 the State of National Safety was lifted but those sentenced by the military courts have not been released, others awaiting trial remain in detention, and hundreds of students have been expelled from their universities. Two Shiite men have been sentenced to death for allegedly killing a police officer during the protests.

More detailed reports of torture in detention are emerging as some detainees are freed.

On June 22, 21 political and human rights activists were sentenced in an unfair trial falling far below international legal standards, with 8 receiving life sentences and the remaining 13 given between two and fifteen years imprisonment. While the military court trials have stopped, the cases which began in them are being transferred to civilian courts. Both the process and timeline in these proceedings are unclear to defendants and their lawyers. These include the 47 cases brought against doctors and other medical professionals apparently prosecuted for providing medical treatment to protestors.

Two days after the government lifted the emergency laws, the Formula One Grand Prix authorities announced that the previously postponed 2011 Bahrain Grand Prix would be scheduled for October. That decision was overturned a week later, following an international outcry about awarding the prestigious international sporting event to Bahrain during a continued crackdown on dissent.

On June 15 the U.S. Labor Department announced that it had accepted a complaint filed in April by the AFL/CIO, the largest U.S. labor organization, alleging violations of labor protections contained in the free-trade agreement between the United States and Bahrain, signed in 2006. Specifically, the AFL-CIO petition highlights well-documented, widespread, and serious violations of human rights, including labor rights. The Labor Department said it would seek information about whether Bahrain's actions violate the agreement.

On July 2 a government-organized “National Dialogue” began in Bahrain with strong public support from the U.S. government. It faced immediate criticism from human rights defenders in Bahrain, however, as being unrepresentative and cosmetic. A few days before the dialogue started, the King of Bahrain announced the establishment of a human rights commission comprised of internationally-recognized experts to investigate human rights violations since February.

Human Rights Defenders and the Crackdown

The situation for human rights defenders in Bahrain remains difficult and dangerous. Despite the lifting of the emergency laws, some are banned from leaving the country, and fear arrest, physical assault, and detention. Some prominent activists like Abdulhadi Al Khawaja remain in detention (Al Khawaja was one of those sentenced on June 21 to life in prison in the major show trial). Foreign journalists continue to be harassed. Nabeel Rajab, president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), and Maryam Al Khawaja, also of BCHR, have been targeted in an anonymous smear campaign accusing them of 27 crimes, including torture and the murder of civilians and members of the Bahraini security forces.

Other defenders, speaking on condition of anonymity, say they live in fear of attack by Bahraini security forces, and assume that their telephone conversations are monitored. Protesters wounded by security forces told Human Rights First they are still afraid to seek treatment at hospitals or other government health centers in case they are arrested or tortured.

Some, such as Rajab, were unconcerned about being seen talking to Human Rights First, but most remain nervous, making elaborate arrangements to meet in out of the way places.

Victims of human rights violations took significant risks to tell Human Rights First what had happened to them, as some had been forced to sign a pledge saying they would not discuss the details of their detention when they were released.

Mohammed Al-Maskati of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights said, “We [human rights activists] live under the constant fear of arrest. They can come at any time for us.”

Another human rights defender said she has been in more than one house that was raided by the police in recent months. “I still wake up scared. I have clothes ready, next to the bed. I get up sometimes in the middle of the night and look out of the window if I hear a noise, thinking it’s them again. It’s a permanent fear that they could come at any time, day or night.” Another young activist told Human Rights First how she slept fully dressed in case the police came for her during the night.

The U.S. embassy in Manama has contacted some of the families of those detained, and broadened the range of human rights defenders it speaks to, as recommended in Human Rights First’s May 2011 report [Bahrain: Speaking Softly](#). The presence of Assistant Secretary of State Michael Posner at one of the military trial hearings of medical personnel in Manama in mid-June was also cited as a positive gesture by some human rights defenders. Bahraini media continues to attack U.S. “interference” in Bahrain’s affairs. On June 5 the newspaper *Al Wasat* published an editorial declaring that “American black fingers are aiming to weaken the Gulf” states so that the U.S. can establish its own “Greater Middle East.” Other media attacks have targeted individual officials, including U.S. embassy officers Ludovic Hood and Stephanie Williams. Williams was accused in the *Akbar Al Khaleej* newspaper on June 4 of colluding with opposition groups and adopting a “sectarian Shiite agenda.”

However, human rights defenders continue to complain that the United States is less forceful and clear in its statements about human rights violations in Bahrain than it is with other countries in the Middle East, and that there is still a “double standard” on Bahrain, where criticism of the Bahraini government remains muted and vague. Several complained that U.S. statements on Bahrain often start with an assurance that Bahrain is a strong partner, or important ally.



Above: Mohammed Al-Maskati, President of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights

“This sounds like the [United States] will be friend with Bahrain no matter what, no matter how many people they torture or kill, like the relationship is unconditional,” said one human rights defender. U.S. government comments still tend to avoid publicly naming individual victims of human rights violations. They also noted that tear gas canisters and rubber bullets used by the Bahraini authorities against civilians were supplied to the Bahraini security forces by the United States.

Human Rights Defenders and the National Dialogue

President Obama warmly welcomed the National Dialogue which opened on July 2, as “an important moment of promise for the people of Bahrain. The United States commends King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa for his leadership in initiating the dialogue.” Chair of the dialogue, Bahrain’s parliamentary speaker Khalifa Dhahrani, said it would have “no preconditions and no ceiling” on the demands that could be raised by delegates, declaring that the aim was to draw up “common principles for the relaunch of the political reform process,” he said.

In a speech on May 19, President Obama said of Bahrain, “The only way forward is for the government and opposition to engage in a dialogue, and you can’t have a real dialogue when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail.”

However, the National Dialogue has little credibility with many human rights defenders and activists in Bahrain. Human rights defenders note that only 35 of the 300 seats in the dialogue meeting have been allocated to the opposition, and that many of the pro-democracy elements are not represented at the dialogue, some of whom remain in prison. The main opposition party, Al Wefaq, is under enormous pressure from government critics, including many of its own members, to pull out of the talks. “If President Obama said you can’t negotiate when the opposition’s in jail, then why does the United States government support the dialogue when opposition leaders are still in jail?” asked one human rights defender.



Above: Billboard in Manama promoting the National Dialogue

Some young human rights activists told Human Rights First they considered the dialogue to be “a waste of time” and “a puppet show.” One asked “Why dialogue with those who agree with you and will just say yes, yes, yes?” Another described it as “a nonsense – they’re still expelling students and our families are still in prison during this dialogue.”

One participant in the dialogue told Human Rights First how it is organized. "There are four halls, each having between 50 to 80 participants, and each participant talks for five minutes. The session ends while some still have not talked. Nothing is known about how all these chaotically dispersed talks will end up as a document to be passed to the King for approval and that he will then pass to parliament," he said. "You have it all predetermined and the final document has already been decided. These meetings are nothing more than a camouflage. It is a joke to call it dialogue to start with."

One young activist said, "I would have supported the national dialogue if it was led by the Crown Prince. But then the King appointed Khalifa al Dahrani, such a hardliner. It will lead to failure."

Human Rights Defenders and the International Human Rights Panel

The investigation into human rights violations by the international team is to be headed by Cherif Bassiouni, a law professor and former U.N. human rights investigator, who will chair the panel of five human rights experts. According to state media, the Bahraini King declared that "Any person, whether acting on behalf of the government or any other capacity should be aware that we have not given up on our principles and would not tolerate any human rights violations....Such acts do not help anyone, but hurt everyone."

The Minister for Human Rights and Social Development, Fatima Al Baloooshi, assured Human Rights First that the commission is totally independent, that everyone in Bahrain will be encouraged to cooperate, and that she herself is "determined to see the truth about the stories of human rights violations."

Like the national dialogue, the announcement of the inquiry was warmly welcomed by the United States State Department. Spokesperson Mark Toner said of the commission on June 30, "I think

from our consultations with the Bahraini government, we believe that this will have the type of broad authority necessary to be legitimate in the eyes of the Bahraini people."

However, news of the inquiry received mixed reactions from human rights activists in Bahrain, with some saying they would "wait and see" how the commission operated before judging, while others expressed misgivings about an inquiry set up by the King. "We've been lied to by the King too many times before," a recently released detainee told Human Rights First. "The committee will report to the King, how can it condemn him?" asked a student. Several torture survivors told Human Rights First that, while they didn't trust the inquiry, they would cooperate with it and tell its investigators what had happened to them. Many activists expressed concern that the human rights situation would continue to deteriorate while they awaited the commission's results.

Human Rights First spoke with 11 former cellmates who had spent months in detention and were subjected to very similar treatment, including prolonged periods of torture. Six of them said they did not trust the Bassiouni commission enough to cooperate with it, while the other five said they would.

"It's a trust issue," said one former detainee. "It's hard to reassure people that it's safe to give their testimonies; some of us know who our torturers are – we know their names. If we name them what will happen to us?" Another told Human Rights First, "We can't wait until October [when the committee is due to report], especially if they're going to keep people in detention until then."

One young human rights defender told Human Rights First, "I'm willing to cooperate with the commission, but the idea of it is just to polish the picture of Bahrain for the international community. There's a conflict of interest if they're investigating violations by the government that appointed them."

Torturing the Injured and Sexual Abuse

Credible, consistent accounts of torture continue to be recounted as more detainees are released. Dozens of recently released detainees spoke to Human Rights First on condition of anonymity. Virtually all of them said they were blindfolded, beaten, forced to denounce Shiite leaders, and to sing the Bahraini national anthem.

Some of those released told Human Rights First how their interrogators would take a break, mid-torture, to pray. Others described how they helped correct the syntax in the false confessions they were forced to sign in the hope that it would make the statements more credible, and so end the beatings. One said that the policeman who forced him to sing the national anthem did not know the words himself and so followed on a songsheet.

Another man released from detention at the end of June told Human Rights First, “We were forced to kiss photos of the King, belly dance, to make animal noises – to make the sound of a dog or a cow or a donkey. One guy was beaten because he didn’t know how to make the sound of a giraffe. I mean, who does?”

“Those of us who were detained between mid-March and early April really got the worst treatment,” one man in his 40s explained. In early April, news surfaced that four men had died in custody. Photographs of their bodies, cut and bruised, were widely circulated. After that, from around April 12, detainees report that their conditions were less harsh. One of those detained in the early weeks recalled “continual beating – even when you were using the toilet they came in and beat you. We weren’t allowed to wash or pray. We were blindfolded throughout those weeks – you had to feel around for the food when they fed you.” In the first days of his detention, he said he was forced to stand continually, without sleep, for four days while being kicked and punched. “I asked why are you beating me? The guy said, ‘Because you are a Shi’a.’” Several former detainees say the guards would sometimes sing a song at night about slaughtering Shi’as.

“Being blindfolded for so long ...that was much worse for me than the handcuffs,” said another. “You lose all sense of time or place, or of distance. You don’t know if it’s day or night, if the food is breakfast or lunch.” One of the medical professionals who was blindfolded for a long period explained, “After 48 hours or so you get visual hallucinations. I was seeing a beautiful garden with people in it, pure hallucination.”

More than a dozen detainees told Human Rights First that they were already injured when they arrived in detention and that the torturers focused their abuse on existing injuries. A doctor also confirmed to Human Rights First that a young patient he treated in a medical facility had been beaten and kicked in the area where he had recently undergone surgery.

One man in his 20s told Human Rights First that he was asked by his interrogators where he had recently been operated on. “I showed them the scar on my leg. Then that’s exactly the spot they concentrated on.” Four men reported they refused to go for medical treatment while in detention because of what had happened to other prisoners who had gone to either the Bahrain Defense Forces (BDF) Hospital or the clinic at the Ministry of Interior.

One teenager spoke to Human Rights First just hours after being released from more than two months in detention. Although shot and seriously injured, he said he was blindfolded, handcuffed to the hospital bed, and verbally abused during his time at the Bahrain Defense Forces Hospital.

Another told Human Rights First how he had been seriously injured when riot police fired birdshot, small spherical pellets, into his face from only three yards away. He reported that he was taken to Salmaniya Hospital, where he was tortured by security forces for several days. “Then they took me to a police station where I was beaten in the face with rifle butts. They knew where I was injured and so they hit me there. I was there for months. Twice they took me to the BDF hospital for treatment but both times I was handcuffed to the bed and beaten by the soldiers, so I refused to go again.”

One 24-year-old man with birdshot wounds near his eyes had also been detained for more than two months. He told Human Rights First a few days after his release, “They knew where I’d been hurt so they beat me around the eyes with rifle butts. They made me say bad things about the opposition leaders and say anti-Shi’a slogans. I saw friends being taken for treatment to the BDF hospital and to the clinic at the Ministry of the Interior, but they were tortured when they went there so I wouldn’t ask for treatment in case it happened to me.”

Another man in his 30s spoke to Human Rights First the day he was released after months in detention. He had visible birdshot wounds. “I was on the sixth floor of the Salmaniya Hospital. Doctors were allowed to treat me under the supervision of masked security men. I was slapped by the security men, verbally abused, humiliated, asked if I’d had sex at the Pearl Roundabout. They took me to the BDF hospital, blindfolded and handcuffed where I was abused more.” Like the other men, he was forced to sign something that he was not allowed to read before being released.

In a small country like Bahrain, the chances of seeing someone who interrogated you is a real possibility. One activist told Human Rights First: “I have a friend tortured in the 1990s who ran into her former torturer in the street and he said hi to her...it’s not something you can get over easily. People need to feel safe and if the torturers are out there in a small country they’ll never get over it.”

Human Rights First heard consistent reports of sexual abuse, of being stripped and molested and of photographs being taken. “They forced us to describe in explicit details how we have sex with our wives,” said one. “They touched us, molested us, fingered us on our genitals and anus... the shame of it, I mean such humiliation.... They asked us about the underwear Shi’a women were wearing at the Pearl Roundabout and if we had sex there.” One man in his 40s said they told him, “Tell us what we want or we will bring your wife here and rape her in front of you.”

Released detainees and others are beginning to discuss the longer-term ramifications of having been tortured. One woman told Human Rights

First that her father had said, “The worst part isn’t when they’re torturing you, it’s when you’re asleep waiting for them to come for you, beating their sticks on the bars of the cells.” Zainab Al Khawaja’s husband was arrested three months ago. “He has been tortured in detention,” she said. “I can only imagine when he is released he’s not going to be able to sleep and will keep waking up, thinking of the times he was tortured, like the hundreds of other people.”



Above: Zainab Al-Khawaja, whose father has been sentenced to life in prison by a military court, and whose husband has been detained for several months. Both have been tortured while in custody.

Testimonial

A medical professional in his 30s told Human Rights First how he helped take injured protestors from the Pearl Roundabout to the Salmaniya Hospital in mid-February, after the Bahrain authorities made their first attack. In mid-March he was in the hospital when calls started to come through about attacks by security forces in Sitra and other villages. His story is quoted at length not because it is unusual, but because it is typical:

At about 5pm on March 15 I went in an ambulance with a driver to Sitra – we were getting really desperate phone calls for help. When I got to the health center there it looked like the final scene from *Titanic*—people everywhere were terrified, crying, praying. We took a guy with bird pellet

wounds and then went to another house where we picked up some more casualties.

The ambulance was jammed with medics and patients – 11 of us in all. We were trying to take the injured back to the Salmaniya Hospital but then a police helicopter started to follow us, and police jeeps chased us, firing at the ambulance with birdshot. Eventually we were surrounded and had to stop,

I got out of the ambulance first. A policeman put a rifle to my face and forced me to kneel down; several policemen started kicking my head. I could hear the others being pulled from the ambulance – patients and medics – and being beaten. The police threatened one of the young women, saying they were going to strip her.

They made us all lie on the floor, handcuffed, and I heard about eight single shots. I thought they were executing us all and I said a final prayer. They left us there for a minute, came back and threatened to shoot me in the genitals. They beat me semi-conscious.

They then went away, and someone let us into their house nearby. My colleague tried to go back to the ambulance for medicine but was shot at by the police so had to come back. He made it at the second attempt. Locals took us in cars to the hospital where I was examined. I was in a critical condition.

Masked men interrogated me for about an hour, then said they had a long list of crimes and would decide later which ones to pin on me. I managed to get out of the hospital and stayed with a relative for a week. Then they called me, and told me to report for interrogation.

They showed me pictures of people who weren't me and said I'd done things I hadn't. This went on for a week and then they said I could go home. But they were lying.

He was kept in detention for over two months, and repeatedly tortured.

They told me to insult Shi'a leaders. Lots of us had to chant 'Long Live the King' together. I was told to strip, was sexually humiliated and abused. I was told I wasn't allowed to pray.

Every time you hear the door opening you get scared, that they're coming for you. They targeted where I was injured to beat me. I wasn't allowed to wash or remove my blindfold for four weeks. When they finally said I could take it off I had to open my eyes with my fingers – the wax had gummed my eyelids shut.

That was early April, and they started to treat us a little better after that. We think it was because they'd killed four guys during interrogations and were worried that they might have more deaths in custody if they continued to treat us like that.

There was a rumor that we'd be released on June 1, when the State of National Safety ended. The day before, a police guy came and told us to get our things ready, that we had a nice surprise. We were all excited about getting out. But they were just moving us to different cells.

A few days later the medics were among the prisoners taken to court. He says they were beaten as they left their cells and in the bus on the journey there. "First we thought we were going to be released, but then we walked into the courtroom. I was told I had a lawyer, but I never got to speak to him. They beat us on the way back too."

He was finally released at the end of June after signing three papers that he was not allowed to read. He is waiting to hear the date for his next hearing.



Above: Rula Al Saffar, 48, is the president of Bahrain Nursing Society and an assistant professor at the College of Health Sciences. She conducted her postgraduate studies at Widener University in Pennsylvania and worked in emergency rooms in hospitals in Texas and Delaware. She was arrested on April 4, and is the only female medical professional still in detention.

Riot Police Attack Unarmed Women

On the afternoon of Thursday July 6 in Bilad al Qadeem, Brian Dooley of Human Rights First witnessed riot police attacking pedestrians:

A small protest rally was planned in Bilad al Qadeem, about 2 miles from Manama, for late afternoon. An hour and a half before it was due to start, I was on the outskirts of the area, some distance from the planned meeting site. People were standing in doorways, chatting. We drove into the area without any problems, without being stopped by police vehicles or anything. It was a calm, chatty atmosphere.

I got out of the car and started to talk to some people – there were groups of women in twos and threes here and there. I was walking on the sidewalk with three or four other people next to a small children’s playground, when suddenly riot police wearing navy blue uniforms and carrying shields appeared behind us, about 40 yards away.

Without any warning the riot police opened fire on us and other people in the street with sound bombs, tear gas canisters, and rubber bullets. There were other people further up the road, as well as us, as people started screaming. Half a dozen gas canisters landed within a 10-yard radius of us – the police were very close. Rubber bullets ricocheted off of the ground in front of us. One of the women I was talking to fell, and another one next to me was hit by shrapnel, and her hand started to bleed. I could see people ahead of us running, panicking. The police kept on firing at us.

A vehicle pulled up alongside us – the young injured woman got in, a couple of us jumped in behind her, and it took us all away. She was too scared to go to the hospital, fearing arrest, so she had to get medical help elsewhere – there was quite a lot of blood, but we took her somewhere for treatment.

We were not part of a rally, or even near a rally. There were a few dozen people spread out along the length of the street in small groups like ours, and the police just appeared and attacked us.

What Human Rights First observed is consistent with many other reports of police firing on unarmed, peaceful civilians without warning.

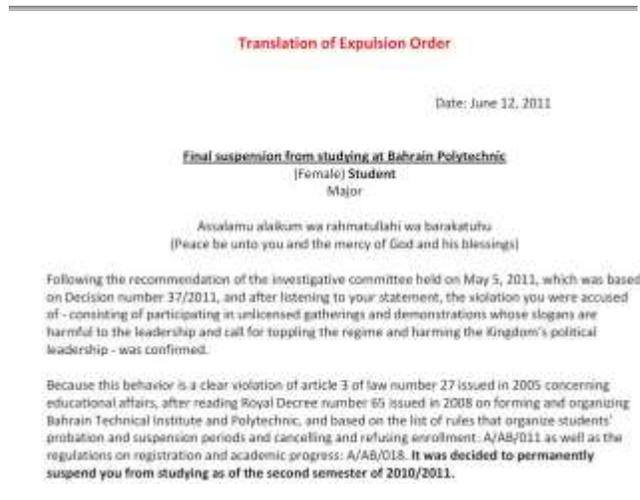
Students Expelled

Human Rights First spoke to a range of students in their late teens and early 20s from the University of Bahrain and the Bahrain Polytechnic University, all of whom have been expelled. Each was summoned to appear before an investigations committee. According to the Polytechnic students, the questions posed to the more than 60 students summoned were:

- Do you know that the government pays a lot of money for you to study at Bahrain Polytechnic?
- Do you have a Facebook account?
- Did you go the Pearl Roundabout?
- Did you participate in any marches or gatherings?
- Did you see any pictures or hear any chants that contain any hateful messages against the government or the royal family?
- Are you a member of any political organization or society?

“I was asked during the interrogation if my family loved the King,” said one student. The Polytechnic students had all been previously asked to sign a code of conduct, which declared, “Bahrain Polytechnic is a government institution, and students are advised that participation in any activities of a political nature could lead to a disciplinary action or your dismissal from Bahrain Polytechnic.”

The University of Bahrain students questioned by the investigation panel underwent a similar experience. Some were shown printouts from their Facebook pages and asked to explain comments they’d posted. “They showed me a crowd picture with my face ringed in red, and asked if I’d been at the Pearl Roundabout demonstrations,” said one student.



Above: Expulsion notice received by Bahrain Polytechnic students



Above: Asma Darwish and Fatima Al Halwach, students expelled from Bahrain Polytechnic for participating in peaceful demonstrations

While the Polytechnic students have been given their transcripts, those at the University of Bahrain say they have not, and consequently cannot transfer to another university overseas. “They targeted the straight A students, the smart and active ones,” said one student. Polytechnic students report that 49 have been expelled, while the number for the University of Bahrain is believed to be much higher.

Bahrain Government Responds

Despite strenuous lobbying efforts, the Bahraini government continues to face international criticism for its suppression of the protests. The government's own accounts of recent events have been questioned. The state-run Bahrain News Agency, for example, reported that U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, in a June 3 meeting with Bahrain's Minister for Social Development, Fatima Al Balooshi, had conceded that her office had received misinformation about Bahrain. On June 7 Pillay's office issued an angry response to the reports, declaring, "The High Commissioner would like to stress that she made no such statement, and is disturbed by this blatant distortion of her words."

Minister Al Balooshi, whose Ministry has recently been renamed the Ministry for Human Rights and Social Development told Human Rights First that without the imposition of the State of National Safety "this country would have gone to civil war." She was determined, she said, to see the truth come out about human rights violations in Bahrain, that the international investigation committee would have the government's full cooperation, and that everyone should feel safe in speaking to the committee in confidence. She gave Human Rights First a government-made DVD purporting to show that the events around the Salmaniya Hospital in mid-March were

manipulated by doctors and other medical professionals, that ambulances were used to ferry weapons around the city, and that – in a bid to exaggerate wounds and heighten political tensions – "some doctors provided treatment that was neither necessary nor needed [*sic*]"

According to the Bahrain News Agency, on July 10 "the cabinet approved the motion regarding a snag-proof media strategy to reply to the practices of some TV space channels and websites as well as some newspapers which disseminate deceitful lies in order to blemish the Kingdom of Bahrain and its national achievements."

Whether this new media strategy includes allowing international journalists unfettered access to the country is unclear. In May Reuters journalist Frederik Richter was expelled from Bahrain, where he had been based since 2008, because, as he was told, his reporting during the crackdown on pro-democracy protestors lacked balance.

On July 12, the state-run newspaper the *Daily Tribune* carried the front page headline "CHALLENGE MEDIA BIAS." The article reported that the Crown Prince and the Prime Minister had met the previous day and "urged the mass media to fight foreign media's defamatory campaign against the Kingdom."

Conclusion and Recommendations

Human rights defenders in Bahrain who are not in detention continue to face harassment. Although it is no longer common for people to be seized from their homes or workplaces Bahrain remains a tense and difficult environment for defenders.

One defender told Human Rights First he no longer goes to the city center because his whereabouts and activities are tweeted by antagonistic members of the public. One released detainee's movements, what she was buying in shops, and who she was with, were also tweeted as she visited a shopping mall.

The events of recent months have strained workplace relations to the breaking point between Sunnis and Shi'as. The Minister for Human Rights and Social Development, Fatima Al Balooshi, told Human Rights First that some people in her department are no longer on speaking terms, an apparently common breakdown in trust in many of the country's workplaces. A social segregation is developing, with certain shops and restaurants being identified as Shi'a or Sunni. "Costa Coffee, Dairy Queen and Papa John's are where Shi'as are more likely to go now, Starbucks and Hardee's for Sunnis," one human rights defender told Human Rights First.

"It's not that I'm boycotting the other places," said another. "I just know where I'll feel safest, that other people in the restaurant won't be tweeting where I am or saying things about who I've been spotted talking to."

There is widespread suspicion that the government is insincere about wanting to address human rights issues, and that the national dialogue and "the Bassiouni Commission" (as the international investigation committee appointed by the King is commonly known) are primarily attempts to impress the international community.

Many are asking the U.S. government to rapidly produce a public assessment of progress on the dialogue, and to scrutinize the process of the international human rights investigation. "The [United States] must publicly criticize the continuing violations – the detentions, the attacks on protestors, the trials and the rest," said one human rights defender. "Despite what it says, the Bahrain government really cares what the [United States] says so it has to use that voice."

A common analysis is that the government is waiting until the last few months of the year to consider any significant changes. Appeals have been postponed until later in the year, the trials of the medical professionals and others cannot resume until September at the earliest, and the National Dialogue and the Bassiouni Commission are due to report after that. "They'll be holding lots of cards in October or November," said one human rights defender. "That's when they'll decide what concessions to make. But we can't wait that long, people are too angry."

Recommendations for the U.S. Government

The U.S. government's initial public reaction to the violence in Bahrain was feeble and constrained. However, since Human Rights First released its report and recommendations in May, the U.S. government has taken several positive steps that represent a more appropriate approach with an increased emphasis on human rights. These include:

- When President Obama delivered his Middle East address on May 19, he explicitly cited specific human rights violations in Bahrain, identifying the crimes of detention and attacks on places of worship, and stating that a dialogue of reconciliation cannot be real if opposition members remain in jail.
- The Obama Administration nominated an ambassador to Bahrain, a critical request of U.S. policymakers by Bahraini human rights defenders.
- The United States, at the June session of the U.N. Human Rights Council, made a specific statement about human rights violations in Bahrain.
- Representatives of the U.S. embassy have observed some of the trials of human rights and pro-democracy activists.
- The Department of Labor has accepted the AFL/ CIO's petition to review the U.S. trade agreement with Bahrain, in light of allegations that the government summarily dismissed more than 1,700 workers in retaliation for peaceful protests.

Yet more is needed. Based on this report and other recent findings, Human Rights First has updated its recommendations to the U.S. and Bahraini governments, as follows:

President Obama should:

- Publicly call for the release of all prisoners in Bahrain who are being held for exercising their rights to nonviolent freedom of expression and assembly.
- Publicly state that national dialogue and reform should explicitly address discrimination on the basis of religion and condemn sectarian violence.

Secretary of State Clinton and other senior administration officials should:

- Publicly identify necessary conditions or benchmarks for a successful national dialogue, and publicly comment, without delay, on when or whether the dialogue is not working. These should include:
 - The release of all peaceful protestors from jail and charges dropped against them.
 - An end to the expulsion of students and the reinstatement of those expelled.
 - Public release of the concluding documents for consideration by the King and the Parliament within a reasonable timeframe.
- Publicly identify necessary conditions for an international investigation into the violence – including that it is politically independent, is given wide access to victims, their families, and civil society organizations, as well as all relevant government officials, and are provided with adequate resources and time to carry out a comprehensive investigation.
 - The United States should also put the commission on notice that it is monitoring the protection of those who testify about their experience.
 - At the start of the investigation, the Bahraini government should also make a commitment to publicly release the report and respond to its findings.

- Adopt public guidelines for engagement between U.S. embassies and human rights defenders in Bahrain, and elsewhere.
- Stop premising its official statements on Bahrain with reassurances that Bahrain is a “key ally,” since it undermines the gravity of the fundamental role of human rights.
- Immediately and publicly condemn unfair trials, torture, and death sentences in Bahrain.
- Support independent and transparent investigations by the Bahraini authorities into widespread allegations of human rights violations and for all those responsible for ordering or committing abuses to be held accountable. The international commission is not suited for carrying out criminal investigations and prosecutions.
- Be clear and specific about individual human rights cases and violations in regular public statements, extending beyond general human rights protections such as President Obama’s condemnation of the attack on places of worship in his May 19 speech.
- Condemn violence against peaceful protesters in Bahrain and oppose the prosecution of nonviolent demonstrators and restrictions on peaceful protest.
- Call for an end to incommunicado detention of political prisoners in Bahrain. All detainees, even if accused of serious security offenses, should have access to their family members, lawyers, and necessary medical attention.
- Express particular concern about the targeting of medical personnel involved in treating injured protesters and athletes in peaceful protests. Call for an end to such practices and accountability for those who ordered and carried out such attacks.

- Publicly state that national dialogue and reform should include accountability and restitution for the destruction of Shiite places of worship, and prevent further violations of freedom of religion or belief.

U.S. embassy staff in Manama should:

- Continue to engage more closely and regularly with a broad range of human rights defenders in Bahrain by calling and visiting them.
- Continue to engage with families of those detained for peaceful protest, and issue public statements to support them.
- Continue to observe trials.

Additionally, State Department officials should:

- Determine if the Bahraini authorities have committed violations of religious freedom as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, and take appropriate action under the act.
- Ensure that U.S. arms transfers are not facilitating repression and gross human rights violations in Bahrain by investigating which specific units of the Bahraini military and other security forces are implicated in gross violations of human rights and, if applicable, suspend all equipment, money, and training to such units.

Congress should:

- Immediately act on President Obama’s nomination of Thomas C. Krajeski as U.S. ambassador to serve in Bahrain.
- Continue robust oversight of the Leahy Law governing U.S. military and other security assistance to Bahrain.
- Convene hearings to call attention to the damage to vital U.S. national interests resulting from continuing violations of human rights in Bahrain.

Recommendations for the Government of Bahrain

Human rights progress cannot be delayed until the international investigation is completed. Human Rights First recommends immediate steps for the Bahraini government to take:

- End its persecution of human rights defenders and nonviolent critics.
- Allow human rights defenders to travel freely in and out of the country.
- Release all those detained for exercising their rights to peaceful expression and assembly. We welcome the recent announcement that some 300 prisoners have been released, 100 of which the Bahrain Center for Human Rights had called political prisoners. This is a first step but many others remain in detention.
- End arbitrary detentions and stop the torture and mistreatment of detainees, and implement safeguards to prevent torture, such as an end to incommunicado detention.
- Immediately release the names of everyone who has been detained since the Declaration of National Safety, and provide an update on whether they remain in custody, and on the status of their cases.
- Revoke the death and other penal sentences handed down in trials that failed to meet international standards.
- Stop labeling its critics as Iranian agents without providing any evidence that nonviolent human rights activists have any other agenda than to promote and protect the universal human rights of all Bahrainis.
- Investigate all deaths in custody and hold accountable those responsible for any wrongdoing.
- Investigate all disappearances and hold accountable those responsible.
- Uphold basic freedoms of assembly, expression, and association.
- Take serious steps to end the systematic discrimination against the majority Shiite community, including the gerrymandering of parliamentary districts, the low representation of Shiites in the security services and other key government positions, and implement nondiscriminatory policies related to the naturalization of non-citizens.
- Protect Shiite places of worship and religious buildings from attack or destruction and respect the religious freedom of all Bahrainis.
- Allow independent human rights organizations and human rights defenders to work free from harassment.
- Sign the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and adopt necessary legislation and regulations.