

Bahrain: Speaking Softly

May 2011

Overview

Bahrain is the smallest country in the Middle East – about a quarter of the size of Rhode Island, with a similar number of people (around 1.2 million).

On February 14, 2011, reform protests – inspired by events in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere – began. The vast majority of those protesting were Shiite Muslims, members of the branch of Islam to which most Bahrainis adhere, calling for a government elected by the people and an end to discrimination in employment and other areas of Bahraini life. Their protests were centered around the Pearl Roundabout area of Bahrain's capital, Manama. Some pro-government demonstrators, mostly from the minority Sunni community, also organized 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 elements of the protestors started to call for more radical reforms, including an end to the monarchical rule of the Sunni al-Khalifa dynasty. Some protests turned violent, and there are reports that some antigovernment protestors entered the university and attacked students, while others attacked Asian migrant workers, causing three deaths.

On March 15, a State of National Safety was announced in Bahrain. The following day, the Bahraini security forces, backed by 1,000 troops from neighboring Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia, 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 reportedly killed and scores of protestors injured by the security forces.

Since then, the country has seen a wave of arbitrary arrests, widespread and credible reports of torture, attacks on Shiite religious sites, large numbers of people suspended or fired from their jobs, at least four deaths in custody, and a number of other deaths of civilians on the street under suspicious circumstances. A Bahraini government official told Human Rights First that he did not know how many people the government had arrested since the middle of March in connection with the political protests. While the Bahraini security forces have released some, they are still arresting others. Security forces have detained over 800 people, and possibly many more in all. The Bahraini government has put dozens of people on trial in military courts, and four Shiite men have been sentenced to death. Bahrain's King Hamad bin 'Issa Al Khalifa has said the State of National Safety, announced on March 15, will be lifted on June 1.

This report is based on research conducted by Human Rights First in Bahrain from May 8 to May 13. Human Rights First met with human rights defenders and activists, victims of human rights violations and their families, eyewitnesses to protests and clashes, representatives of the Bahraini government and the political opposition, journalists, medical practitioners, and others. It 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. government should take to address the crisis.

Human Right Defenders Imperiled

The situation for human rights defenders in Bahrain is extremely difficult and dangerous. The atmosphere in Bahrain is one of a tense standoff between the government and its critics. While the government appears to have quelled large-scale protests, security forces continue to make arrests and intimidate. The government has begun show trials where death sentences have been passed.

Bahraini authorities have detained, tortured, and threatened human rights defenders. Human rights defenders have been beaten up, their homes attacked, and some are banned from leaving the country. It is commonly believed that their phones are tapped.

“Civil society is in paralysis,” said one. Relatively few human rights defenders remain at liberty to continue their work, but some show remarkable courage in the face of constant intimidation and harassment.

“The time of most risk is between 1 a.m. and 4 a.m.,” said Mohammed Al Maskati of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights. “That’s when the security forces usually come and arrest people in their homes. After 4 a.m. we can sleep normally because we think they won’t come that night.” While some human rights defenders were unconcerned about being seen talking to Human Rights First, others were extremely nervous, making elaborate arrangements to meet in obscure places, or insisting that we remove the batteries from our mobile phones to prevent

conversations being recorded remotely. Victims of human rights violations took serious risks to tell us what had happened to them.

The U.S. embassy website in Bahrain features the introduction to the 2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices published by the U.S. State Department on April 8, 2011. It notes that “In places like Tunisia and Egypt, we are witnessing popular demands for meaningful political participation, fundamental freedoms, and greater economic opportunity,” and recognizes that citizens in the Middle East “seek to build sustainable democracies in their countries with governments that respect the universal human rights of their own people. If they succeed, the Middle East region, and with it the whole world, will be improved.” The report also acknowledges the role played by human rights activists willing to face great personal risk. Secretary Clinton highlighted the importance of these organizations in a speech she gave in July 2010 in Krakow, Poland, to the Community of Democracies. As she said, “Societies move forward when the citizens that make up these groups are empowered to transform common interests into common actions that serve the common good.”

Without mentioning Bahrain in this context, the report makes a more general point. “In closed societies, where repressive governments seek to control and stifle the debate on sensitive political and social issues, governments view these independent local citizens’ organizations as a threat rather than a resource, and democracy and human rights defenders are singled out for particularly harsh treatment.”

But in Bahrain, human rights defenders told Human Rights First that they felt unsupported by the United States in their human rights work. Several human rights defenders voiced disappointment that the U.S. embassy and other embassies had appeared to become detached from them since the February protests began, and were not engaging with them as often as before. Some said the U.S. embassy should call the families of prisoners detained for peaceful activities to show their support, and embassy representatives should ask the Bahraini authorities to attend the military trials as

observers. They also suggested that the United States speak out against the unfair trials and the death sentences, though one conceded it was difficult for the United States to do that “when it still has the death penalty itself.”

A common complaint from human rights defenders was that the United States was not as forceful or clear in its statements about human rights violations in Bahrain as it had been on other countries in the Middle East, that there was a “double standard” on Bahrain, where criticism of the Bahraini government had been relatively muted, too vague, and unspecific. Several noted that while the United States had shown vigorous support for a special session of the United Nations Human Rights Council to discuss human rights violations in Syria, it had not shown similar enthusiasm for a special session on Bahrain.

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.

Arbitrary Arrests and Detentions; Disappearances; Torture

Well over 800 people have been arrested since the middle of February. The overwhelming majority are Shiite Muslims who called for political reform. Typically they have been arrested without any warrant, their whereabouts kept unknown for long periods. In the overwhelming majority of cases they have had no access to lawyers or visits from their families.

Those who have been released from detention, or family members who witnessed an arrest, describe a common modus operandi by the security forces. People were often taken from their homes late at night by teams of masked men who ransacked the house and stole valuables before taking the arrested person to an unknown destination. Some people have been arrested at their workplaces.

Released detainees also described to Human Rights First a common pattern of ill-treatment,

including long periods of blindfolding (sometimes for several days), being beaten while handcuffed, and being made to sing the Bahraini national anthem or to chant pro-government slogans. Several said they had been forced to sign something they were not permitted to see.

Doctors and other health professionals have been particularly targeted. Medicine is a common career for Bahraini Shias, who are prevented from employment opportunities in many areas of the government and other professions.

The main medical facility in Manama, the Salmaniya Hospital, was a focus of the government crackdown. The military claimed that Shiite doctors were siding with the antigovernment protestors and it occupied the hospital. Dozens of medical professionals have been detained and were still being arrested up until May 12.

Others arrested earlier remain in detention, like Rula Al-Saffar, an assistant professor at the College of Health Sciences and the head of the Bahrain Nursing Society, who trained in Pennsylvania and Texas. She was arrested on April 4. Others have been released and spoke to Human Rights First.

One female physician told Human Rights First how she was kept blindfolded for the first five days of her detention, which lasted for over two weeks. “First, a policewoman put a blindfold on me and put me in old-fashioned metal handcuffs,” she said. “I had to spend the night lying on the floor like that – cold, handcuffed, and blindfolded.”

She was brought for interrogation by civilian police officers after about 24 hours. “A policewoman slapped me, a two-handed slap on either side of my face and started banging me on the head with her fist,” she said. At around 5 o’clock one morning she and other detainees were forced to get up and shout pro-government slogans. “Male police officers were abusing us verbally, saying terrible things. Every time my name was called I was terrified, not knowing what they might do to us,” she said.

When members of the police didn't agree with her testimony they slapped her again because it contradicted their accusations. Then she was transferred to military interrogators. After both interrogations she was forced to sign and thumbprint statements despite still being blindfolded and not knowing what they said.

On the last day of her detention she said a police officer told her to kiss a photo of the Prime Minister of Bahrain before being released. She, like many other medical personnel, has now been suspended from her job.

Another told Human Rights First:

I was taken from the hospital where I was working during the middle of the day. Four masked men came and took me for an interrogation. They blindfolded me and took me to the investigations office. They were verbally abusing me, saying the doctors at the hospital were sectarian, only treating Shiite patients.

Then they moved me to another room – I was blindfolded the whole time and a policewoman pushed me along the corridor for more questioning.

They wanted me to say that doctors took injured people for operations unnecessarily, they had very minor injuries but doctors made these injuries worse and caused death on purpose in two cases.

They said we wanted to make Bahrain look bad, to hurt its international reputation. I said no, patients were really bleeding badly, some from live ammunition wounds, and we didn't make their wounds worse.

The policewoman started to beat me and she said 'You have to go to the boss, they know how to get a confession out of you.' They took me to another office – I was standing the whole time, about three hours. It was so terrifying I was hoping I'd die. You don't know how long it will continue, what they will do next. You're blindfolded the whole time – they repeat the same questions over and over and if

they don't get the answer they want they beat you.

So they took me to 'the boss' and he was alleging that I took drugs from the hospital to the medical tent at Pearl Roundabout [where there was a makeshift medical center for the injured protestors]. I said I didn't – he said I was a whore and my mother is a whore and I was beaten very badly by the same lady. I could hear several men laughing and shouting at me not to cry. He gave me back to the policewoman and she continued the interrogation, all night long. They made me sing the national anthem and other songs saying the opposition leaders are crazy – they sang it and forced me to repeat it.

In the early hours of the morning they let me lift my blindfold just enough to sign something, though I wasn't allowed to see what it was. The next day they took me to the military police and it was the same thing – interrogation and then I had to sign something else I couldn't read. When I was being interrogated, the man in charge kept giving instructions to the typist - 'delete that, paste that there, cut that bit and move it,' and so on.

I was finally moved to jail where the other detainees were. At first we were separated from each other, and put with the common criminals, but then they put us together. They didn't allow me to call my family. For one week I was begging them to call my children, as they were alone since their father was also detained but they refused and allowed me to call only after a week.

After some weeks they told us one evening about 5 p.m. we all had to go back to the Investigation Office. We were all terrified – we called it the House of Horror. They took us there, more than a dozen of us together, and we were called one by one. I had to sign a document to say I hadn't been beaten. Then, about midnight, I was released.

Another woman told Human Rights First how her husband had been seized in the middle of the night by masked men. "About 10 men wearing civilian clothing and black masks forced their way into our house," she said. "My husband was taken in front of my four children, who are still traumatized, eight weeks later. The masked men took cash, laptops, cameras, and cars from our home."

She said the house was ransacked and Shiite religious items were broken. "There was no warrant, no explanation. They just came and took him. He was allowed to call us for a minute a few days later and has been able to call twice since. We don't know anything more, and we haven't been able to bring him clothes. He was wearing pajamas when he was taken two months ago."

Detainees report having to run blindfolded into walls, being made to belly dance in front of their guards, and having to stand for hours at a time. Medical professionals told Human Rights First that there is widespread evidence of detainees who were beaten on the soles of their feet, beaten with lengths of hosepipes, subjected to electric shocks, and sexually abused.

Some people have simply gone missing. Hameed Abdul Ali, a 27 year-old man from Nuwaidrat Village, hasn't been seen since March 16. According to eyewitnesses, he was shot and injured by security forces using shotguns during protests on that day, and taken for treatment to Salmaniya Hospital. He hasn't been heard from since, though his family received a letter from the construction company where he worked saying he'd been fired.

Human Rights First spoke to two men who also suffered gunshot wounds from the security forces that day and were taken to the Salmaniya Hospital. One said he saw staff in the medical store being beaten by security forces as they lay handcuffed on the floor.

Another, Mohammed Bati, age 42, said five riot police were waiting near his house in Nuwaidrat Village when he went home on March 15. He said one took deliberate aim at him from about 7 meters and fired a shotgun. Bati's body is peppered with buckshot wounds along his right side and arm. He was taken to Salmaniya but

managed to slip out past the security forces after two days.



Above: Mohammed Bati shows HRF buckshot wounds sustained in a targeted attack by riot police near his home on March 15.

Deaths In and Out of Custody

There have been at least four deaths in custody.

Hassan Jassem Mohammad Mekki, age 39, from Karzakan, was arrested at his house in the early hours of March 28. His family was shown a death certificate dated April 3 giving the cause of death as "heart failure."

Zakaraya Rasheed Hassan al-'Asheri, died on April 9 after being arrested on April 2.

Ibrahim al-Saqer died in custody on April 9 after being arrested on April 3 in Hamad. His body had marks suggesting he had been tortured. On May 12 the Ministry of the Interior announced

that five guards were arrested in connection with the death and would be tried by military court.

Karim Fakhrawi, a founder of Bahrain's only independent newspaper, Al-Wasat, and a member of its board, died in custody on April 11, according to his death certificate. Fakhrawi, 49, was a Shiite businessman and member of the opposition party Al-Wefaq.



Above: Karim Fakhrawi, co-founder of Bahrain's only independent newspaper.

He was arrested on April 3 when he went to a police station to report an attack on his house the previous night. His stepdaughter Fatima told Human Rights First, "On Saturday April 2 our house was empty - we were all away. Neighbors told us that about 30 vehicles came to our home at 11.30 at night, and that security forces blasted the door open."

She said they broke the security alarm system, ransacked the house, and stole watches, a laptop, perfume, a video camera, and money. Human Rights First saw evidence of damage to several doors in the house and to the alarm system. She told Human Rights First they scattered furniture and personal effects throughout the family home, and broke Shiite religious artifacts.

"The next morning my father went to the police station to report what had happened. He was told to come back 30 minutes later. He did, and was arrested by a man wearing a mask," she told Human Rights First. That was the last his family heard about Karim Fakhrawi for 10 days. When they inquired about him at the police station they were told he "wasn't in the computer system."

Then on April 13 his stepdaughter says she was called by a policewoman and asked to go to Salmaniya Hospital because her father "wasn't well." When she arrived she was told he was not in the hospital's computer system either. Later that day she was met there by the policewoman, who was accompanied by six men wearing masks. She was told that Karim Fakhrawi was dead in the hospital morgue, that he was sick when he had been detained, and had died of kidney failure. His family denies that he was ill when he went to the police station on April 3.

His stepdaughter also says that when his body was returned to the family they were warned not to take pictures of it, but dozens of pictures were taken and appeared on the internet. His body shows cuts and severe bruises on his arms and legs. His death certificate says he died at 1 p.m. on April 11 from kidney failure arising from heart problems, a claim strongly denied by his family.



Above: Death certificate for Karim Fakhrawi, claiming he died from an irregular heartbeat and kidney failure on April 11.

There are reports that more than two dozen other people have died under suspicious circumstances. Sayed Ahmed Sayed Saeed, age 15, was playing soccer with his friends near his home in Sar on March 30, say his family, when he was killed by security forces.

According to his family, it was around 5:30 p.m. and the area was quiet. They say two groups of security vehicles appeared - nine in all. When the boys playing soccer saw them, they ran, and the police started shooting rubber bullets at them.

They say Sayed Ahmed Sayed Saeed was hit by a 'sound bomb' cartridge on the back of his head. He continued running, but was caught and beaten by the police. His father took him to a relative's house and then to the American Mission hospital. He was being examined by a doctor there when, according to his family, security troops came and took him to Salmaniya Hospital, where he died, still wearing a Manchester United jersey. The medical report claimed he had a fractured neck, which Bahraini state media reports suggested was from an accident. His family strongly denies this and insists he was killed by the injury from the security forces.



Above: A flyer bearing the image of Sayed Ahmed Sayed Saeed and the question, "For what offense was he killed?"

At around 8:00 p.m. on April 5, 61 year-old Sayed Hamed Sayed Ebrahim, from Sar, went to get some official papers photocopied. There were government security forces wearing masks in the neighborhood, says his family. The next morning, around 7:30 a.m., his body was found in a bag about 500 meters from his car. Police claimed that he died from "circulation problems," although those who saw his face claimed it showed signs of assault.

Military Trials

Special courts set up under the State of National Safety have begun hearing cases and passing sentences. At the end of April, death sentences were imposed on four young men after proceedings that fell short of international fair trial standards. A military court trial, held behind closed doors, convicted them of the murder of two policemen during protests in March. Death sentences were imposed on: Ali Abdullah Hassan Al Sankis, Qassim Hassan Matar Ahmad, Saeed Abduljalil Saeed and Abdulaziz Abdulridha Ibrahim Hussain. Three others were given life sentences.

The military courts have started to convene almost daily, convicting and sentencing people. On May 12, 12 people were sentenced to a year in prison for participating in demonstrations, and on the same day, 29 year-old nurse Hassan Salman al-Matooq was sentenced to three years



Above: Sayed Ahmed Sayed Saeed, age 15, surrounded by Manchester United photos, as posted on his bedroom wall.

in prison for fabricating photos and participating in demonstrations.

A large show trial opened on Sunday May 9, featuring 21 leading human rights activists, political opponents, bloggers, and others. The 21 suspects are being tried (seven of them in absentia) before the Lower National Safety Court. They have been charged with various national security crimes, including “insulting the army,” “organizing and managing a terrorist group for the overthrow and the change of the country’s constitution and the royal rule,” and “seeking and correspond[ing] with a terrorist organization abroad working for a foreign country to conduct heinous acts.” Some of these charges carry the death penalty.

Human Rights First attempted to gain entry to the trial on its second day, Thursday May 12, but was refused entry at the courtroom door despite assurances from the Bahraini authorities that human rights organizations and other observers would be admitted.

The government contends this is not a military trial, but that the court is a hybrid one consisting of three judges – one military and two civilian. However, the trial is being held at the military court, and is conducted in a heavily militarized atmosphere, with dozens of armed, uniformed soldiers (some in back masks) in and around the court building. According to those in court, the military judge is in charge of proceedings, and the two civilian judges do not speak. “They are only there for show,” someone at the hearings told Human Rights First. The public prosecutor is also from the military.

Relatives of the defendants who saw them in court told Human Rights First they were in bad physical and mental shape. Several were limping and others have suffered drastic weight loss. They have not had adequate time to consult their lawyers, and there are credible reports of their torture in custody. Their families say they are all being held in solitary confinement.

Leading human rights defender Abdulhadi Al Khawaja is among those charged. His wife and his daughter, Zeinab, had been allowed a 10-minute meeting with him on May 8. Zeinab told Human Rights First that his face had been badly

damaged with multiple fractures while in the custody of security forces. He had undergone a four-hour operation in the military hospital. “But when he was supposed to be recovering from the operation they tortured him again,” she said.

On the first day of the hearing Abdulhadi Al Khawaja asked the judge for assurances from the court that defendants would no longer be tortured. On the second day, he told the court that earlier that morning the guards at the court had threatened to kill him. On May 16, the third day of the trial, he was ejected from the court after telling the judge that three days before he had been taken from his cell by security guards and threatened with rape. His family fears for his life, and worry that his speaking out puts him in greater danger.

The 13 others who are present at the trial are Abdulwahab Hussain Ali Ahmed, Ibrahim Sharif Abdulraheem Mossa, Hassan Ali Mushaima, Abduljalil Abdullah Al Singace, Mohammed Habib Al Saffaf, Saeed Mirza Ahmed, Abduljalil Radhi Mansoor Makki (Abduljalil al-Muqdad), Abdulhadi Abdulla Mahdi Hassan, Al Hurr Yousif Mohammed, Abdullah Isa al-Mahroos, Salah Hubail al-Khawaja, Mohammed Hassan Jawad and Mohammed Ali Ismael.

The seven being tried in absentia are: Akeel Ahmed al-Mafoodh, Ali Hassan Abdullah, Abdulghani Ali Khanjar, Saeed Abdulnabi Shehab, Abdulraoof al-Shayeb, Abbas al-Umran and Ali Hassan Mushaima.

These trials fall far below international standards of fairness and due process. The claims of torture by the defendants should be urgently investigated, and those held for peacefully expressing their views immediately freed.

Intimidation and Provocation; Destruction of Places of Worship

Several human rights defenders cite a deliberate Bahraini government policy of intimidation and provocation of the Shiite community, which has, in their view, damaged short and long term chances of a political solution. “It is a

catastrophe,” said one. “Rich, poor, active, inactive, all are shaking with fear if they are Shia,” said another. More than 1,000 Shias are estimated to have been suspended from jobs in the public and private sectors.

Shiite places of worship have been attacked and demolished, and young Shiite men are routinely detained for short periods in police stations where they are beaten and humiliated before being released. Others report how, at security checkpoints in March and April, they were asked their religion. If they were Shia they were beaten, or their money and phones stolen.

The Bahraini authorities have bulldozed about 30 Shiite mosques or other religious structures, claiming they are “illegal structures.” Some are mosques, some meeting halls, or *mattams*, and some are catering halls or food cabins attached to mosques and used at weddings and other major religious events.

One young woman whose father had been tortured told Human Rights First, “The attacks on the mosques are upsetting people more than torture.”

One leading human rights defender told Human Rights First, “Mosques, *mattams*, and food cabins are being demolished without warning. They come in the middle of the night. Religious documents are left buried in the rubble, and anti-Shiite slogans are written on the walls nearby. Prayer beads and *turbas*, Shiite prayer stones, are left in the debris.”

He suggested there was a policy of “collective punishment” against the Shiite community and described the government action as “sectarian cleansing” designed to provoke the youth.

Human Rights First met with three men who were seized by policemen while praying in the ruins of a destroyed mosque at the end of April. They told Human Rights First that when the police seized them, they handcuffed them and blindfolded them by pulling their shirts up over their heads. They were each put into separate police vehicles and taken to a police station. All claim they were beaten during the 15-minute journey to the police station where they were properly blindfolded.

Two say they were forced to sing the national anthem, and one to sing a song about the

Bahraini prime minister. They told Human Rights First they were made to stand for about three hours, and were verbally abused with sectarian insults.

One said his head was banged against a wall and it bled, and he was asked about people in his village involved with protests. Another said he was told that if he provided three names of villagers who were involved he would be released. At about 1:30 a.m., all three were taken for fingerprinting and to sign statements and pledges not to take part in any protests. One of them is a public employee, and was told that if he went public with his story, he would be fired from his job. The three were released some distance from the village – and without their shoes – at about 2:30 a.m.

Another man told Human Rights First that police approached him around 5:30 p.m. one evening at the end of April and told him to remove Shiite flags from his house. They blindfolded him, took him to a police station, and beat him. “They slapped and punched me very aggressively,” he said. He was also forced to sign a statement without reading it, and threatened with re-arrest if he put the flags back up. He says the police went to his home and forced him to replace the Shiite devotional flags with a Bahraini national flag.

Bahrain Government Response

In a flat denial of numerous accounts of arrests and torture, Ambassador Saeed Mohamed Al-Faihani from the Bahraini Ministry for Social Development told Human Rights First that no one in Bahrain was being tortured, that “everyone who’s been arrested has been shown an arrest warrant and proper documentation and that no one had been taken by masked men from their home.”

He claimed that the protestors had started peacefully but they turned violent and the government was forced to act. He said the protestors were supported by Iran and Hezbollah, were very coordinated and extremely good at public relations. He told Human Rights

First that Bahrain was eager to keep its “reputation for protecting human rights.”

However, the Bahraini government has not taken any action against those who used excessive force against the protestors, has not introduced fair legal mechanisms to try those charged, and has disregarded basic legal safeguards for those arrested.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Human rights defenders and others in Bahrain told Human Rights First that they are increasingly disappointed in the U.S. government’s response to the severe and continuing crackdown. The U.S. is viewed in Bahrain as a beacon of human rights, and should be expected to use its special access to the Bahraini military through the Fifth Fleet and a Foreign Military Financing program as a platform to enable human rights protections. Bahraini activists see a double standard in U.S. rhetoric and action in relation to Bahrain compared with Syria, Libya, Yemen, Egypt, and Tunisia. For instance, human rights defenders suggested that Secretary Clinton’s statement on April 12 that a “one-size fits all approach doesn’t make sense in such a diverse region at such a fluid time” was taken by the Bahraini government as a signal that the United States would not apply the same standards to them as to other countries in the region.

When Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Jeffrey Feltman returned from a visit to Bahrain a week later, a State Department official said “he concurred with the Bahraini leadership’s own embrace of the principles of reform and the respect for rule of law and coexistence.” His words were mentioned by human rights defenders as a particularly weak response.

For many in Bahrain, the United States is seen to be engaging in political selectivity and adopting a “see no evil” policy towards the Bahrain government. When Human Rights First asked a representative of the U.S. Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain for a reaction to the crackdown, Lieutenant Martin responded that it was “Not our place to get into that discussion.”

If the Fleet’s mission is in part to maintain stability, then the Pentagon should at least explain how ignoring the crackdown achieves that goal.

Perceived weakness in support of human rights in a close U.S. ally like Bahrain weakens U.S. support for peaceful democratic change throughout the region, and human rights defenders in Egypt, for example, have complained to Human Rights First about the U.S. government’s inaction in Bahrain. At a time when perceptions of the U.S. position on human rights are teetering, forceful and frequent demonstrations of leadership by the most senior U.S. officials are necessary.

Recommendations for the U.S. Government

President Obama should:

- In his upcoming speech on U.S. policy in the Middle East, President Obama should make specific reference to human rights violations in Bahrain and make clear the U.S. government’s support for the fundamental human rights of the Bahraini people.
- 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. Mention at least one such case, that of Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, for example, by name.
- Immediately appoint a U.S. ambassador to serve in Bahrain.

Secretary of State Clinton and other senior administration officials should:

- Immediately and publicly condemn unfair trials, torture, and death sentences in Bahrain.

- Call for an independent inquiry by Bahraini authorities into widespread allegations of human rights violations and for all those responsible for ordering or committing abuses to be held accountable.
- Be clear and specific about human rights cases and violations in regular public statements, extending beyond general human rights protections.
- Condemn violence against peaceful protesters everywhere; oppose the prosecution of nonviolent demonstrators and restrictions on peaceful protest.
- Call for and support the convening of a special session on Bahrain in the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva.
- 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. Call for an end to such practices and accountability for those who ordered and carried out such attacks.

U.S. embassy staff in Manama should:

- Engage more closely and regularly with a broad range of human rights defenders in Bahrain by calling and visiting them.
- Publicly display support for the families of those detained for peaceful protest.
- Request access to the military trials and send observers.

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. Investigate which specific units of the Bahraini military and security forces are implicated in gross violations of human rights and, if applicable, suspend all aid and arms transfers to such units.

Congress should:

- Convene hearings to call attention to the damage to vital U.S. national interests resulting from continuing violations of human rights in Bahrain.
- Fulfill its obligations to oversee the end use of U.S. foreign assistance and arms transfers in Bahrain.
- Commit to a speedy confirmation process of an ambassadorial nominee.

Recommendations for the Government of Bahrain

By embarking on a policy of repression against human rights defenders and political opponents, the government of Bahrain is escalating sectarian tensions within Bahrain and in the broader Gulf region. The escalation of such tension strengthens extremists who gain political benefits from conflict between Shiites and Sunnis and provide a pretext for greater Iranian involvement in Bahrain to support endangered Shiites. The recent militarization of the conflict by the Bahraini government is counterproductive in that it increases the threat from forces that the Bahraini authorities claim to be seeking to contain.

Human Rights First urgently recommends that the Bahraini government change course and pursue a policy that responds to the legitimate needs and interests of all its people through finding a peaceful political agreement with the majority population.

- The government should end its persecution of human rights defenders and nonviolent critics.

- All those detained for exercising their rights to peaceful expression and assembly should be released immediately.
 - Independent human rights organizations should be permitted to operate free from harassment.
 - Basic freedoms of assembly, expression, and association should be upheld.
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- The government should 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.
 - The government should put an end to arbitrary detentions and disappearances.
 - The government should end the torture and mistreatment of detainees. Safeguards to prevent torture, such as an end to incommunicado detention, should be implemented immediately.
 - The government should investigate all deaths in custody and hold accountable those responsible for any wrongdoing.
 - Prisoners accused of security offenses related to political protests should be given a fair trial before a civilian court with all safeguards required under international law.
 - The government should end systematic discrimination against the majority Shiite community.
 - The government should protect Shiite places of worship and religious buildings from attack or destruction and respect the religious freedom of all Bahrainis.
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