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United Kingdom: Amnesty International welcomes investigation into Henderson's role in torture in Bahrain

The British government's announcement that a British national who is alleged to have played a key role in torture in Bahrain is being investigated is a welcome step toward justice, Amnesty International said today.

Major-General (Bahraini rank) Ian Henderson, a 71-year-old British national, has been an official in Bahrain's Security Intelligence Service (SIS) since 1966, rising to the position of deputy and then head of the service until his reported retirement two years ago. He has been on holiday in Britain since the end of December 1999.

The SIS and other security apparatuses in Bahrain, including the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), have for many years been responsible for gross human rights violations. The names of a number of SIS and CID employees have featured regularly in the testimonies of former political detainees and prisoners, particularly regarding the use of torture under interrogation.

Although torture is prohibited by Bahrain's Constitution, it is practiced and has been systematic with regard to political prisoners in the past, particularly in the mid-1990s. The most common methods of torture include severe beating with electric cables on the back and on the soles of the feet, suspension by the limbs, victims being blind-folded with their hands tied behind their backs and left standing up for hours, and prolonged solitary confinement.

Over the years Amnesty International has documented extensively human rights abuses in Bahrain. It has repeatedly raised concerns about torture with the Bahraini authorities and with Major-General Henderson himself as far back as 1987. The government of Bahrain has consistently denied torture is used in detention centres and prisons but to the organization's knowledge it has not carried out any proper investigation into allegations of torture.

The UK Government, under international law, has an obligation to conduct an inquiry into Henderson's role in the use of torture in Bahrain. A superior who knew or should have known subordinates were committing human rights violations and took no steps to ensure punishment of those responsible and stop the abuse, is criminally responsible. Also under international law, torture is a crime against humanity when committed on a widespread or systematic basis.

Should the UK government find after an initial investigation that it has sufficient admissible evidence on which to prosecute Henderson, it should seek his return to the UK for trial or cooperate with any government ready to carry out such prosecution in a fair trial.

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