

Public Statement

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Bahrain: General Amnesty welcomed-but legislation should be amended

On 5 February 2001 in a speech marking the 33rd anniversary of the Bahrain Defence Force, the Amir of Bahrain, Shaikh Hamad bin 'Issa Al Khalifa, declared a general amnesty for political prisoners and detainees as well as opposition members living in exile.

Two hundred and eighty nine political prisoners and detainees held in connection with the civil unrest of the mid-1990s have now been released. They include four prisoners of conscience, 'Abd al-Wahab Hussain, Sayyid Ibrahim 'Adnan al-'Alawi, al-Shaikh Hassan Sultan and Hassan Msheima', who had been held without charge or trial for five years. The releases are reported to be unconditional.

Moreover 108 Bahraini nationals living in forced exile, mainly in the Gulf and in Syria, have been told that they can go back to Bahrain. The Ministry of Interior released their names which have since been published in Bahraini newspapers.

According to a statement released by the Ministry of Interior on 5 February "the pardon for the rest of the Bahrainis abroad will also be implemented based on the same procedure". At least 400 other Bahraini nationals, including women and children, are reported to be living in forced exile, especially in Europe.

"We welcome the release of political prisoners and detainees in Bahrain", Said Amnesty International. "We hope this will be followed by more positive steps such as the amendment of the country's legislation to bring it into harmony with international human rights standards." Amnesty International has for many years campaigned for the repeal of certain laws, including the 1974 Decree Law on State Security Measures.

More than 1100 political prisoners and detainees have now been released following pardons from the Amir who assumed power in 1999 following the death of his father. This latest general amnesty comes only 10 days before a referendum on a national charter which will pave the way for political reforms, including an elected parliament.

Amnesty International has requested talks with government officials in Bahrain in March.

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