

Bahrain: Amnesty International's Concerns about human rights situation

“While the human rights situation in Bahrain has improved in the last two years with the release of hundreds of political prisoners, the setting up of a human rights body within the Consultative Council and the ratification of the UN Convention against Torture, the mechanisms that have facilitated gross human rights violations in the past are still in place,” Amnesty International said in a report released today.

Human rights violations continue to take place, albeit on a lesser scale than during the period of civil unrest in the mid-1990s. Anti-government protesters or suspected political opponents are routinely arrested and detainees are at risk of being held for up to three years without charge or trial, the maximum allowed under the “Decree Law on State Security Measures, in force since October 1974. Several hundred people remain held without charge or trial. Among them are five prominent political and religious leaders, all prisoners of conscience, who have been in detention since January 1996. “The five have recently been put in solitary confinement because they refused to sign statements apologizing for their past political activities and committing themselves not to be involved in any political or social activities in the future.”

Political trials are still held before the State Security Court whose procedures fall far short of internationally recognized standards for fair trial, with defendants having no right to appeal against sentences and verdicts. “Hearings before this court are invariably held *in camera* and defendants may be convicted on the basis of coerced “confessions” given to the police or a police testimony that such “confessions” were given”.

Despite the ratification of the UN Convention against Torture in 1998 dozens of allegations of torture and ill-treatment have been reported but have rarely been investigated by the government. The Government continues to use forcible exile as a punitive measure against suspected non-violent opposition activists or critics. Hundreds of Bahrainis, including women and children, are prevented from entering the country and are being forced to remain in exile.

Many restrictions are imposed on non-governmental associations and no national independent human rights organization is permitted. In October 2000, the authorities rejected a request by a group of people, including lawyers, to set up an independent human rights organization. “The authorities must allow human rights NGOs not only to function without hindrance or restrictions but be actively encouraged to engage in human rights promotion and protection”, Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International has welcomed the positive steps taken to date but is urging the Bahraini Government to bring the country’s laws and practice into closer harmony with international human rights treaties without further delay.

\ENDS

public document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>