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BAHRAIN: WOMEN AND CHILDREN ARE SUBJECT TO ARBITRARY ARREST AND INCREASING ABUSE

For the first time in the recent history of Bahrain women and children as young as seven have been arrested, beaten and threatened in custody -- a disturbing pattern that looks set to continue, Amnesty International said in a report issued today.

Since the outbreak of "pro-democracy" activities in 1994 many Bahraini women have joined in public protests, a shift from their traditional role away from the public arena. They wrote petitions to the Amir, Sheikh 'Issa bin Salman Al Khalifa, urging the restoration of parliament, and led demonstrations calling for the release of their male relatives and of all political prisoners.

Scores of women were beaten for having joined in demonstrations or for trying to prevent the arrest of a male relative. Some were held as "hostages" in order to coerce male relatives to hand themselves over to the authorities while others were detained, apparently as punishment for the opposition activities of their male relatives.

Some women were also arrested in order to deter other women from joining public protests. Most were held incommunicado, some in solitary confinement, for up to two months before being released, usually without charge or trial.

"The arrest and beatings of these women were a cynical attempt by the government to stifle criticism and pressure the women to turn over their husbands, fathers and brothers to the authorities," Amnesty International said.

In April 1995, 20 professional women sponsored a petition addressed to the Amir asking for an end to the cycle of violence, a national dialogue and the restoration of democratic rights. 'Aziza al-Bassam, Hassa al-Khumairi and Munira Ahmad Fakhro were dismissed from their jobs because they refused to withdraw their names from the petition.

The following month, 'Afaf 'Abd al-Amir al-Jamri was arrested, apparently simply because she was a daughter of Sheikh 'Abd al-Amir al-Jamri, a leading Muslim Shi'a cleric who was detained in 1995. She was reportedly beaten by women police and held incommunicado for almost one month before being released without charge or trial.

At least 10 women were arrested in February 1996 and held for about two months without access to relatives or lawyers. Some of them had husbands or fathers in jail and others had already been briefly held in detention in 1995. All were released without charge or trial.

“None of the women were ever charged with committing any violent acts; most were not charged at all,” Amnesty International said. “The majority were prisoners of conscience -- arrested simply because they dared to join a protest.”

In March 1996, around 20 female high school students from 16 to 18-years’ old were arrested in connection with school and street demonstrations. They were held in prison for more than a month without seeing their families or lawyers and were harassed during interrogation. One of them stated that a male prison officer threatened her and the other young women with rape and insulted and sexually taunted them.

All women and female high school students arrested in 1996 were released. Nevertheless, since some of them had been detained previously in the 1994-95 unrest, Amnesty International fears that these women could face arrest and further abuse.

The organization was especially concerned to learn that Bahrain’s Information Minister Mohammed Ibrahim al-Motaweh recently told an Arabic-language daily that women have helped to “transport arms” used in the unrest because they can avoid being searched. He provided no further details, and in the absence of any charges against a single woman in that connection, Amnesty International fears these statements may be a pretext for further arbitrary arrests.

Some of the detainees following mass arrests in both last year’s unrest and the recent disturbances were children as young as seven years’ old. It is believed that, at any one time, about 60 children may have been held without access to legal assistance or family. In some cases, security forces targeted children to hold them “hostage” until relatives sought by police turned themselves in. A number of children were tried and handed the maximum sentence of 10 years, to be served in a corrective institution (islahiyya).

“Children are the most vulnerable of all victims -- and the appalling absence of even the most basic legal safeguards left them open to ill-treatment and to unfair trials,” Amnesty International said.

The Bahraini government has also continued its policy of forcible exile of suspected political activists and/or their families, and banning from return after several years of voluntary exile the suspected opponents and their wives and children.

“All these practices contravene international human rights standards and international convention,” Amnesty International said.

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