

Human rights groups condemn repression in Bahrain

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The group Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) issued a declaration on Friday condemning the abuse and intimidation of protesters and medical workers in the Persian Gulf kingdom of Bahrain.

The organization's representatives in Bahrain report that Bahraini authorities have arrested at least 32 medics since the mass protests broke out in February. Many of those detained were snatched from their homes in the middle of the night by masked men.

PHR has stated that those detained have been targeted because they treated injured protesters and reported the use of brutal force—such as police using live ammunition—to the media and human rights investigators.

There have been widespread reports of Bahraini police rampaging through hospitals and attacking ambulances treating protesters wounded by the crackdowns carried out by the security forces.

PHR reported the testimony of one demonstrator who, having been fired upon with a shotgun by the police, was too scared to attend a hospital for treatment. “He said that, with an unsterilized knife, he dug out approximately 70 metal pellets from his arm and leg,” the report stated.

Another man told PHR that police had beaten him with rifle butts as he lay in a hospital bed receiving treatment for head injuries he had sustained while peacefully protesting.

“The excessive use of force against unarmed civilians, patients in hospitals and medical services that PHR's investigators documented is extremely troubling and is cause for an immediate international investigation,” said the director of Physicians for Human Rights' Washington office, Hans Hogrefe.

In another incident, security forces assaulted six doctors who were accused of taking down an official

portrait of the prime minister, Prince Sulman al-Khalifa, from the staff lounge of Salmaniyah Hospital.

The PHR report chimes with the findings earlier in March of Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF). The group found that Bahrain's hospitals had become “places to be feared” as the regimes forces and masked pro-monarchy thugs routinely terrorized patients suspected of being opponents of the government.

“Health facilities are used as bait to identify and arrest those who seek treatment,” MSF medical coordinator Latifa Ayada reported April 9. “Wounds, especially those inflicted by district police and military gunfire are used to identify people for arrest, and the denial of medical care is being used by Bahraini authorities to deter people from protesting,” she added.

MSF also recorded a “high level of trauma” among health care workers in Bahrain. Many doctors and nurses are reportedly too scared even to discuss the medical requirements of their patients for fear of retribution from the state.

In a direct threat to MSF, the Bahraini government dismissed the group's findings in a statement as “part of an ongoing, orchestrated campaign by the protest movement.”

The US-backed monarchy in Bahrain has violently repressed anti-government protests that rocked the small island nation for over a month from February. Open expressions of anti-government sentiment have been largely quelled since martial law was declared March 15. The day after the state of emergency was declared, Bahraini security forces backed by over 1,500 troops and police from the neighboring monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates launched an especially vicious attack on protesters in the capital, Manama, in which several demonstrators were killed and hundreds wounded.

Since then, an estimated 1,000 people have been arrested or “disappeared.” Police and pro-regime thugs routinely stalk working class neighborhoods at night, invading people’s homes to attack or kidnap anyone suspected of opposing the dictatorial regime. At least four critics of the government are known to have been tortured to death in police custody since King Hamad al-Khalifa declared the state of emergency.

Amnesty International reported that most of those detained in Bahrain are being held incommunicado, often with no clear indication of which state agency—police, army or secret service—or pro-regime gang had abducted them. “In virtually all cases, weeks after their arrest, their whereabouts remain unknown,” the human rights group stated.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, which is frequently granted access to detainees in conflict zones, has been denied any access to those held by the Bahraini state, a clear indication that torture and extrajudicial killings in custody are commonplace.

Throughout the weeks of vicious reprisals against demonstrators, the Bahraini regime has received the complete support of the United States. A few anemic calls for “restraint” notwithstanding, the Obama administration has backed the al-Khalifa dynasty to the hilt.

Since the outbreak of protests in the country, the regime has received US Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen in Manama, both of whom praised the longstanding alliance between the US and Bahrain. The Pentagon has its Navy Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain, and the country is considered a key strategic ally, allowing Washington to project its authority throughout the Persian Gulf region.

Typical of Washington’s attitude to the situation in Bahrain was a US State Department advisory issued April 12. The document warned that “the situation in Bahrain remains fluid, with active security operations continuing in various parts of the country,” but reports that “With an increased security presence on the streets, many of the shops and businesses have reopened. Even though daily routines are returning to normal, there remains the possibility that spontaneous violence may erupt.”

Not only is there a “possibility” of “spontaneous violence,” as the State Department claims—deadly force

is being used by the regime on a systematic basis to crush all opposition. But for Washington, marauding gangs of Bahraini troops, police and pro-regime thugs terrorizing patients in hospitals and families in their beds, and torturing detainees in secret locations represent the return to “normal.”

Nothing could better express US imperialism’s true attitude to human rights abuses, the supposed justification for the war against the Libyan regime of Col. Gaddafi.

To be continued



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