



Baroness Catherine Ashton
High Representative of the European Union
for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
Vice-President of the European Commission
242, rue de la Loi
1049 Brussels

Brussels, 11 April 2013

Dear High Representative,

Ahead of the European Union (EU)-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) ministerial meeting scheduled to take place in Manama on 1 July 2013, the undersigned organisations are writing to urge you to make a determined effort in pushing for improvement in the human rights situation in Bahrain, including through the release of all prisoners in Bahrain who are detained solely for peacefully exercising their legitimate rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. As a first step, we ask you to provide leadership and work together with the 27 EU member states to ensure the adoption of Foreign Affairs Council conclusions on the human rights situation in Bahrain.

Since demonstrations began in February 2011, widespread and serious human rights violations carried out against those who have participated in, or are perceived to have, supported anti-government protests in the country persist. The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) documented evidence of torture, deaths in custody, and arbitrary detention, and its November 2011 report concluded that the abuses during the arrests “could not have happened without the knowledge of higher echelons of the command structure” of the security forces. The government has so far failed to implement the BICI key recommendations, either by bringing to justice anyone responsible for abuses at any rank in the chain of command or by independently investigating all deaths of protesters and allegations of torture. The government of Bahrain accepted, either fully or partially, 156 of 176 recommendations during its recent Universal Periodic Review (UPR), but for the most part it has denied that human rights violations have occurred and has avoided putting its commitments into practice. Instead the government has continued harassing, imprisoning and detaining opposition activists, demonstrators, and human rights defenders and other activists.

On 7 January 2013 Bahrain’s highest court upheld the convictions against 13 leading activists for their role in anti-government demonstrations in 2011. Investigations undertaken by human rights

NGOs into the trials of these, and other individuals, lead us to share the concern expressed by the Office of the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights about the lack of fairness and due process afforded to such defendants. In particular, we strongly condemn the harsh sentences handed down, including seven life sentences, to prominent activists as well as political opposition leaders such as Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, Abdul-Jalil al-Singace and Abd al-Wahhab Hussein.

The court ruling came more than a year after the government's pledge to implement the BICI recommendations, which called on the authorities to "commute the sentences of all persons charged with offenses involving political expression not consisting of advocacy of violence" and to overturn convictions imposed after grossly unfair trials.

Bahrain's imprisonment of dissenting voices has continued with the imprisonment of numerous prominent activists and human rights defenders. These included the president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, Nabeel Rajab, sentenced to two years' imprisonment for participating and calling for "illegal gatherings" and Zainab al-Khawaja, the daughter of Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, sentenced to three months in jail in March 2013 for "insulting and humiliating a public employee". Although the Bahrain court of appeal overturned the convictions of 21 medical professionals on March 28, 2013, other medical professionals remain in detention for their role in the protests in 2011, including Dr Ali Al-Ekri who the court of appeal sentenced to five years' imprisonment in November 2012.

We take note that you have regularly called on the Bahraini authorities to implement the BICI recommendations and have expressed concerns around the sentencing of opposition activists. However, your public statements have failed to make explicit calls for the immediate and unconditional release of the activists. We therefore call on you to use the leverage provided through the upcoming EU-GCC meeting hosted by Bahrain and explicitly call for the immediate and unconditional release of anyone imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising their rights, name the individuals in question and publicly and privately press for their release in advance of the joint EU-GCC meeting.

On 17 January 2013, the European Parliament called on you and EU member states to "actively push for the release of the imprisoned activists" and "to ensure the adoption of Foreign Affairs Council conclusions on the human rights situation in Bahrain, which should include a specific call for the immediate and unconditional release of the imprisoned activists". We urge you to implement the European Parliament's call and to work together with EU member states for the adoption of Foreign Affairs Council conclusions calling on the government of Bahrain to:

- Release immediately and unconditionally those held for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly;
- Conduct independent, effective and transparent investigations, by an independent body outside the Public Prosecutor's Office, into all allegations of torture and other ill-treatment, and make the results public;
- Ensure anyone at any level of the chain of command who committed, ordered, condoned, or knowingly or negligently failed to investigate alleged human rights violations is held accountable, including through criminal prosecutions;
- Refrain from further use of unnecessary or excessive force against protesters and ensure any members of security forces who use such force are held accountable.

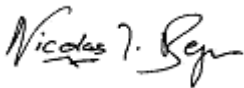
In the joint statement on the human rights situation in Bahrain coordinated and delivered to the UN Human Rights Council on 28 February 2013, Switzerland on behalf of the full EU membership

and sixteen other states explicitly requested the government of Bahrain to fully cooperate with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. They also called upon the government of Bahrain to cooperate with the UN Special Rapporteurs on freedom of association and assembly and on human rights defenders, as well as any other UN Special Procedures that request to visit the country. The group of states pressed the need for the government of Bahrain to implement the BICI recommendations and its UPR commitments. The EU must consider tabling a resolution on Bahrain in the Human Rights Council if there is no significant improvement in Bahrain's human rights situation well before the twenty-fourth session of the Human Rights Council in September 2013.

With the adoption of the EU Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy in June 2012, the EU pledged to "place human rights at the centre of its relations with all third countries, including its strategic partners" and to throw its "full weight behind advocates of liberty, democracy, and human rights throughout the world". In line with this new framework and the EU guidelines on human rights defenders, the EU and its 27 member states have a responsibility to turn these important pledges into concrete action by ensuring a strong and principled EU policy vis-à-vis Bahrain that specifically addresses the situation of human rights defenders and other activists who have been unjustly imprisoned.

We thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Nicolas Berger
Director
Amnesty International's European
Institutions Office



Ziad Abdel Tawab
Deputy Director
Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)



Souhayr Belhassen
President
Fédération internationale des
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Mary Lawlor,
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Director
International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR)

CC:

EU Foreign Ministers

Secretary-General of the European External Action Service (EEAS), Mr. Pierre Vimont

Deputy Secretary General for the European External Action Service (EEAS), Ms. Helga Schmid

Deputy Secretary General for the European External Action Service (EEAS), Mr. Maciej Popowski

EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Mr. Stavros Lambrinidis

Chair of the EU's Political and Security Committee, Ambassador Mr. Olof Skoog

Ambassadors to the EU Political and Security Committee

Head of Cabinet to the High Representative, Mr. James Morrison

Advisor to the High Representative on Gulf States, Ms. Lora Borissova

Advisor to the High Representative on Human Rights, Ms. Suvi Seppäläinen

Head of the Delegation of the European Union to Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Ambassador Mr. Adam Kulach

Chair of the EU's Working Party on Middle East and Gulf Countries (COMEM), Ms. Sophie Kisling

Chair of the EU's Working Party on Human Rights (COHOM), Mr. Engelbert Theuermann

Members of the EU's Working Party on Middle East and Gulf Countries (COMEM)

Members of the EU's Working Party on Human Rights (COHOM)

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