

**To Permanent Representatives of all
member states of the UN Human Rights Council**

Geneva, 1st June 2011

Call for action at the 17th Human Rights Council session on the situations in Bahrain and Yemen

Your Excellency,

The undersigned NGOs are gravely concerned at the Human Rights Council's lack of action to address the gross violations of human rights taking place in Bahrain and Yemen at the Human Rights Council (HRC). Such lack of engagement by the Human Rights Council is unacceptable in light of the violations recorded since February and March 2011, including killings of protesters, arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, the use of torture and ill-treatment, and the crackdown on all dissenting voices. These violations have continued to date and there are fears that the situation could further escalate.

We call upon your government to press for the HRC to adopt a strong resolution, condemning the serious human rights violations committed in the current context of repression of peaceful protests in Bahrain and Yemen. Such a resolution should establish a monitoring and reporting mechanism of the Human Rights Council to address these situations, with the view to ensure that violations taking place do not go unaccounted for.

The Human Rights Council has a duty to "*address situations of violations of human rights, including gross and systematic violations and make recommendations thereon.*" The Council is also required to contribute to the prevention of human rights violations and respond promptly to human rights emergencies. During the special session of the HRC on Syria, several denounced the Council's double standards in this respect and called for a more consistent approach. We believe that your government has a responsibility to react with others to human rights crises wherever they occur and to mobilize the Human Rights Council's mechanisms in order to do so. Choosing to ignore, at the level of the Human Rights Council, the violations committed in Bahrain and Yemen, is not an option.

State security forces in both Bahrain and Yemen have continued to respond to globally peaceful protests with unlawful and excessive use of force and broad repression against any dissenting voice, including opposition leaders, human rights defenders and the media. Moreover, in Bahrain, the government is pursuing a policy of punitive retribution against thousands of Bahrainis, including medical staff, solely because they supported the pro-democracy protests there.

In **Yemen**, the already worrisome human rights situation has dramatically deteriorated into a full-fledged crisis that demands the Council's urgent attention. Since daily demonstrations began in mid-February in opposition to the 33-year rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, state security forces and pro-government assailants acting with impunity have killed well over 145 people and wounded hundreds more during largely peaceful protests. Dozens of protesters have been killed in the last three days alone in the city of Ta'izz when members of the security forces and snipers shot at protesters camped in *Huriya* Square in an apparent attempt to force protesters out of the square. On May 22, armed men blockaded the United Arab Emirates Embassy in the capital of Sanaa, trapping several US, European and Arab ambassadors inside for hours. Later that day President Saleh refused for the third time to sign an agreement to leave office, effectively terminating the deal.

Since then, repeated clashes between President Saleh's forces and armed tribesmen loyal to a powerful opposition tribal sheikh in the heart of the capital have killed almost 70 people including women and children, as well as several key tribal leaders.

The government has also engaged in a widespread intimidation campaign against human rights activists, members of the political opposition and journalists. Security forces have arbitrarily detained or arrested opposition figures including Hassan Baoum, a leader of the Southern Movement protest group in southern Yemen, and his son, Fawaz. The two men were last seen on February 20, when masked security forces took them from a hospital where Hassan Baoum was receiving treatment for diabetes and a heart condition.

More than two dozen human rights activists, opposition leaders and medical workers who have treated protesters have been beaten or physically threatened, or received anonymous text and voice threats on their telephones.

Security forces also have confiscated press runs, blocked news websites and banned or expelled several reporters from Yemen. Armed assailants have attacked or threatened dozens of journalists with impunity, in some cases as security forces stood by.

The human rights crisis in **Bahrain** has grown increasingly grave since mid-March 2011, when the government violently put down pro-democracy and anti-government street protests. Authorities have launched an unrelenting campaign of punitive retribution against anti-government demonstrators, opposition leaders, peaceful critics, and rights activists.

Since mid-February there have been around 30 protest-related deaths. Since mid-March, authorities have arbitrarily arrested more than a thousand persons – activists, opposition party leaders, medical personnel, journalists and bloggers, more than 600 of whom remain in (often incommunicado) detention. The government has provided no information about the total number of persons arrested, detainee whereabouts or well-being, or in most cases the reasons for arrest. They have so far denied visits to detention facilities by independent human rights monitoring organizations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross and UN Special Rapporteurs.

At least four detainees have died in custody in suspicious circumstances since early April. The widespread use of incommunicado detention raises serious concern about torture or ill-treatment in detention. Physicians for Human Rights documented in its April report an all-out assault on healthcare workers and serious abuses against patients and detainees, including torture, beatings, and threats of rape and execution.

Human rights defenders and opposition activists have also been subject to acts of reprisal for their work on exposing human rights violations during protests. Masked security forces beat and arrested Abdulhadi al-Khawaja on April 9. He has allegedly been tortured in detention and has had to undergo surgery as a result of sustained injuries. Al-Khawaja is now on trial along with 20 other individuals alleged to have committed “serious national security crimes”, including “calling for the overthrow of the government”. Ali Abdulemam, a rights defender and blogger, is being tried in absentia as part of the same trial. He is believed to be in hiding. Nabeel Rajab, head of the dissolved Bahrain Center for Human Rights, was subject to physical and verbal abuse by police forces after they arrested him in March. He and his family have since been subject to several attacks by unidentified individuals who have shot or thrown teargas canisters into his home. The latest such incident took place on May 21.

After the declaration of martial law by King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa on March 15, 2011, authorities established special military courts, called courts of “National Safety,” to try protesters, opposition leaders, and rights activists. The courts are presided over by a military judge and the cases are prosecuted by the military public prosecutor. On April 28, these special military courts sentenced four civilians to death and three others to life in prison after a trial that did not meet international fair trial standards. On May 22, a special appellate court affirmed the two death sentences and three life sentences, and ruled that the two remaining defendants be given life sentences as well. On May 8, the special court charged 14 activists and 7 more in absentia, with seeking to “topple the regime forcibly in collaboration with a terrorist organization working for a foreign country.” Bahraini officials say that over 400 people currently face trial in military courts. Meanwhile their whereabouts and well-being remain unknown to their families and they have had no access to lawyers, in some cases more than six weeks after their arrest.

The current human rights crisis in Bahrain is taking place as authorities continuously tighten restrictions on the right to freedom of information. The government has banned numerous websites and publications, including those of legally recognized political societies, arrested journalists and bloggers, and carried out a hostile takeover of the country’s one independent newspaper, *Al Wasat*. Authorities have also televised “confessions” that appear to have been coerced. On the basis of one such “confession,” the authorities recently arrested two former parliamentarians. The government has also dissolved the one secular opposition party that brought together Sunni and Shia – the National Democratic Action Society -- and dissolved or suspended several professional societies such as the Teachers Society and the Bahrain Medical Society.

We believe a failure to respond to these country situations at the HRC will badly undermine efforts to make the HRC an effective and non-selective body for the protection and promotion of human rights of people around the world. The lack of response to the situation in Yemen and Bahrain by the Human Rights Council will contribute to the deepening of these human rights crises.

Sincerely,

1. Amnesty International
2. Asian Forum for Human Rights Development (FORUM-ASIA Bahrain Center for Human Rights)
3. Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights
4. Cairo Institute of Human Rights Studies

5. Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales - CELS
6. CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
7. Committees for the Defense of Democracy Freedom and Human Rights in Syria
8. Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI)
9. Conectas Direitos Humanos
10. Democracy Coalition Project
11. East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project
12. Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR)
13. Haitham Maleh Foundation for the defense of Syrian human rights defenders
14. International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)
15. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
16. International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
17. Sister's Arab Forum for Human Rights – Yemen
18. Syrian Center for Transitional justice and the Empowerment of Democracy
19. World Organization Against Torture
20. Yemeni Organization for Defending Rights and Democratic Freedoms