

18 March, 2011

Call for Urgent Debate on the human rights situation in Bahrain at the 16th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council

Excellency,

As human rights non-governmental organizations we express our deep concern over the current human rights emergency in Bahrain and request the United Nations Human Rights Council (the Council) to hold an *Urgent Debate* on that situation during the Council's current 16th Session (28 February – 25 March, 2011). The systematic use of excessive force by Bahraini security forces constitutes a human rights emergency, and the Human Rights Council has a solemn duty to react promptly to it.

In mid-February 2011, Bahraini security forces used excessive force, including lethal force, against peaceful protesters calling for political reforms. Seven protesters died as a result and scores were injured. Clearly identified medical workers were targeted by police while trying to help protesters wounded by the security forces. After a respite in the use of violence against peaceful protesters by the authorities, on March 15, in response to continuing largely peaceful protests and following the arrival in Bahrain of Saudi Arabian troops and Emirati police to bolster the government, the King of Bahrain declared a three month State of Emergency, thereby giving Bahrain military forces wide powers to suppress protests.

The same day, security forces used excessive force against protesters in Sitra using shotguns, tear gas and rubber bullets, killing two protesters and wounding scores of others, some of whom were then barred from accessing medical treatment at Sitra's medical centre. Ambulance and medical staff were also again subjected to attack and assault by security forces and prevented in some cases from assisting the wounded.

On March 16, military and police forces launched a further operation to clear protesters who had set up camp in Manama's Pearl Roundabout area again using excessive, including lethal force. A further six people were killed on 16 March, including protesters and members of the security forces as what had started out as peaceful protests became violent clashes between security forces and protesters and spread to predominantly Shi'a neighborhoods and villages in and around Manama. The security forces used shotguns, tear gas and are reported to have fired at peaceful protesters using live ammunition. State media reported that Pearl Square was being "cleansed."

On 16 March, Bahrain security forces also blockaded Manama's main al-Sulaymania hospital preventing access by the wounded and are alleged to have fired tear gas into the hospital, prevented the entry or exit of medical staff, and cut off the hospital's electricity supply. Ambulances were impeded from transferring the injured. Doctors and nurses report that many of the injuries they have treated resulted from the use of live ammunition. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has called these acts

“shocking and a blatant violation of international law” in a press release issued on 17 March 2011.

The escalating use of excessive and lethal force against largely peaceful protestors, including the use of live ammunition, rubber bullets, tear gas and beatings, since the current round of protests began on 14 February, 2011, has resulted in at least a dozen deaths and hundreds of injured. The targeting of medical facilities and attacks on medical personnel by state security forces which began shortly after February 14, has intensified as part of the current crackdown, hindering the ability of the wounded to obtain treatment. It has also made it difficult for journalists and human rights defenders to gather information on the precise numbers of killed and wounded.

Human rights defenders have come under increasing attack over the last week. On 10 March, text messages were circulated in Bahrain calling for three prominent human rights defenders to be killed. The message included the addresses and other details of the human rights defenders and copies of their ID cards; it is suspected that internal security agents in Bahrain were involved in this act of incitement. On March 17, seven leading political opposition activists calling for political reform were arrested and have been arbitrarily detained; their whereabouts are currently unknown.

The grave human rights violations being carried out by the government of Bahrain against pro-democracy protestors violates contravenes many universal human rights standards and Bahrain’s obligations under the ICCPR and the ICESR, including the right to life, freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of movement, and the right to health. It is incumbent on the members of the Council to ensure that the Council fulfills its duty to respond promptly to this human rights emergency by urgently examining the allegations of grave human rights violations being carried out by the government of Bahrain, and taking steps to prevent violations from continuing. We urge the Council to hold without delay an Urgent Debate on the human rights situation in Bahrain.

Signatories:

The African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies

The African Democracy Forum

Amnesty International

Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development

Asian Legal Resource Centre

Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies

Center for Legal and Social Studies

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation

Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative

Conectas Direitos Humanos

Corporacion Humanas

Democracy Coalition Project

East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project

Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights

Human Rights Watch

International Commission of Jurists

International Federation for Human Rights

International Service for Human Rights

Partnership for Justice and Human Rights Agenda

West Africa Human Rights Defenders Network