

PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

BAHRAIN: Ongoing instrumentalisation of the fight against terrorism to repress Bahraini human rights defenders

Paris-Geneva, December 6, 2010 – The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint programme of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), expresses its concern for the ongoing judicial harassment of 11 human rights defenders in Bahrain. All were arrested at the end of the summer and are arbitrarily detained since then. They have been accused of alleged membership to a terrorist network aiming to overthrow the government.

Dr. **Mohammed Saeed**, board member of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR), blogger **Ali Abdulemam**, who created a news website in 1999 on Bahrain (www.bahrainonline.org) and a blog, and who is active at the international level in raising attention to the situation of freedom of expression and the media environment in Bahrain, Mr. **Abdulghani Ali Issa Al-Khanjar**, Spokesperson of the National Committee for Martyrs and Victims of Torture (NCMVT), Dr. **Abduljalil Al-Sengais**, Spokesman and Director of the Human Rights Bureau of the Haq Movement for Civil Liberties and Democracy, Mr. **Salman Naji** and Mr. **Hassan Al-Haddad**, members of the Committee of the Unemployed, Mr. **Suhail Al-Shehabi**, active in the Committee of the Unemployed and the Committee of the Relatives of Detainees, Mr. **Ahmed Jawad Al-Fardan** and Mr. **Ali Jawad Al-Fardan**, members of the Committee of the relatives of Detainees in Karzakan, Mr. **Abdul Hadi Al-Saffar**, Chairman of the Committee against high prices and active in the Committee of the relatives of detainees, and Mr. **Jaffar Al-Hessabi**, a Bahraini human right activist involved in the fight against torture who has been living in the United Kingdom (UK) for 15 years, are being tried since October 28 along with 14 other activists belonging to the Shi'a community.

Mr. Antoine Aussedat, mandated by FIDH, as well as representatives of the United Kingdom, United States and French embassies attended. The third hearing was held on November 25, 2010. Access to the court room was reportedly restricted, since only one relative for each of the accused was allowed to enter, in addition to the lawyers. Two *BBC* journalists were denied access, after their camera was confiscated upon arrival at the airport.

At the hearing, one of the accused claimed he had been tortured with electricity. The Public Prosecutor asserted that defence lawyers had full access to their clients and that they had been examined by forensic experts. Defence lawyers reiterated – on the contrary – difficulties in accessing their clients and contested the objective character of the mentioned examinations, given the lack of independence of the forensic experts. They demanded the suspension of the case until the completion of an exhaustive investigation on the allegations of torture, including medical check-ups by independent doctors.

Defense lawyers also denounced the conditions of detention of their clients, which reportedly amount to ill-treatment: limited access to toilets and showers, forced hair and bear shaving, prolonged stays on feet, etc.

The next hearing is scheduled on December 9, 2010, when Prosecution witnesses will be heard. The requests brought by defence lawyers concerning the allegations of torture were once again ignored.

The last two hearings – held on October 28 and November 11 – had been marked by vivid debates around allegations of torture by the accused inflicted during the pre-trial stage and

even after the first hearing, as well as on the necessity of an independent medical check-up and exhaustive inquiry into these allegations, as the casefile is built essentially if not exclusively on confessions extorted from the accused. The defense had also protested against the restrictions imposed on family and lawyers' right to visit and highlighted that only one copy of the criminal case file had been handed to all of the defense lawyers. They further reported attacks made against the accused and their lawyers in Bahraini media, reportedly tolerated and even fueled by the Public Prosecution, in violation of the principle of the presumption of innocence.

The Observatory condemns the judicial harassment campaign which uses the pretext of the fight against terrorism in an attempt to frighten human rights defenders in Bahrain for the mere exercise of legitimate human rights work. The Observatory calls upon the Bahraini authorities to conform in all circumstances with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the United Convention Against Torture (CAT), the Body of principles for the protection of all persons under any form of detention or imprisonment, and the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. The Observatory also urges the authorities of Bahrain to put an end to any kind of harassment against human rights defenders and to release those detained, in compliance with the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

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