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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Conseil International pour le soutien à des procès équitables et aux Droits de l'Homme, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[11 February 2019]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



ICSFT deploras Bahrain's 8+ years of crushing dissent

ICSFT continues to be alarmed by the never ending oppression and harassment of human rights defenders in Bahrain. In spite of lobbying by rights groups and the international community, the state of free speech in the country, and especially speech against the government continues to be deadly. The Bahraini authorities have gone to great lengths to clamp down on any sign of dissent, people have lost their lives and hundreds of others sustained injuries or got arrested and harassed with no end in sight. Human rights defenders and their families continue to be unjustly detained, mistreated, tortured and severely oppressed in response to speaking out for their rights and the rights of their fellow citizens.

The former High Commissioner for Human Rights Mr. Zeid in his last address of the Human Rights Council stressed that Bahrain has continued its refusal to engage and cooperate with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the HRC, and the mandates of the Special Procedures. He also noted that "Bahrain was among the 40 states who had not allowed any visits by a Special Rapporteur over the past five years, and that it also had more than five pending visits from the Special Procedures." Ongoing suppression of civil society and human rights defenders, as well as its use of legislation to curtail fundamental human rights are met with little to nothing accountability measures by the relevant international community. Rather these profoundly damaging acts of reprisal are rewarded with multibillion deals and show of support by countries like the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America – the self-acclaimed champions of democracy and human rights.

This past year we have witnesses the dramatic increase of repressive tactics used against peaceful dissidents including the doubling of death sentences, 26 death sentences were issued or upheld in 2018, and citizenship revocations compared with the previous year. These death sentence judgements are preceded by catalogue of human rights abuses, including highly politicized charges, confessions extracted under severe torture or duress and unfair trials, including the use of military trials against civilians. Several international human rights organizations have issued reports confirming the torture and ill-treatment systemically practiced by the security authorities in Bahrain. For instance, Amnesty International issued a report in 2017 titled "No one can protect you", which contained details of claims and complaints of torture, including the case of woman human rights activist Ibtisam al-Sayegh where she been physical tortured and sexual assaulted during interrogation at National Security Agency headquarters in Muharraq in June 2017.

As part of its ongoing crackdown against dissent leading opposition figure Sheikh Ali Salman was sentenced to life imprisonment, and prominent human rights defender Nabeel Rajab had a ten-year prison sentence upheld. As well the parliamentary elections in November that prevented the participation of any political opposition is another indication of the deteriorating political and human rights conditions in Bahrain. After dissolving Bahrain's two main political parties over the past two years and imprisoning dissents under manufactured charges, the government of Bahrain ratified an amendment in June banning anyone belonging to these parties from running for political office, as well as individuals who had been convicted to a jail sentence of over six months. Which immediately excluded all opposition figures from running. In addition the run up to the election witnessed various forms of intimidation, including summons, arrests and hate speech, and the election itself was marked by severe irregularities, including an unfair electoral infrastructure. The dissolution of opposition groups ahead of the elections, the trend of denaturalization, and the deteriorating human rights situation and shrinking civic space are also a clear indication of the unfair and biased election.

The wide range of repressive tactics employed by the Bahraini authorities against peaceful dissidents include, but are not limited to, arbitrary arrests, unfair trials and imprisonments, citizenship revocations, death sentences, torture and ill-treatment in prisons and reprisals beyond Bahrain's borders. 2018 also marks the largest number where 298 Bahrainis were stripped of their nationality in one year.

Of note, lack of accountability for Bahraini security forces who engaged in extrajudicial violence has led to the creation and perpetuation of a climate of impunity for security force violence. As such, the violent suppression of the peaceful protests in Duraz by Bahraini state authorities, which resulted in the arbitrary arrests of 287 people and the death of five men, the continued unlawful detention and arrest of prominent human rights activists including, Nabeel Rajab¹, Dr. Abduljalil al-Singace, Sheikh Isa Qassim, and Sheikh Ali Salman². Bahrain has shown time and again the lack of commitment to implement its UPR recommendations pertaining to halting torture and ensuring accountability. The widespread use of torture by Bahraini security forces and the lack of accountability for perpetrators of torture remains to be the norm.

The same trend of gross violation of international law and standards depict the current justice system of the country. Judges are appointed by Bahrain's king, the court system is used as a tool to target and attack dissidents signifying the lack of independence of the judiciary, and civilians are tried in a military court. The judiciary system in Bahrain is a tool in the hands of the ruling class, and the current rulings against prominent human rights defenders and opposition leaders are perfect illustrations of the magnitude of lack of due process and independent judiciary in the kingdom. This is next level low to freedom of expression in Bahrain. They once again confirm the lack of transparency and independence of Bahrain's judiciary system.

Bahrain has gone to great lengths to crack down dissent. Dozens of people have lost their lives and hundreds of others sustained injuries, gotten arrested, are on exile as a result of the Aal-e Khalifah administration's crackdown. As of recent, an independent human rights group says it has documented "the arrest of more than 5,000 prisoners of conscience in addition to 200 victims of excessive use of force, murder and torture kingdom", as Bahrain presses ahead with its heavy clampdown on political dissidents and pro-democracy groups.

Thousands of anti-government protesters have held demonstrations in Bahrain since a popular uprising that began in the country in mid-February 2011 demanding the Al Khalifah administration relinquish power and allow a just system representing all Bahrainis to be established.

The ICSFT continues to adamantly decry the lack of response by the UK specifically and the international community to these violations, and in particular states with politically competing and biased interest in Bahrain, including the US and the UK, who choose to turn a blind eye to human rights violations in order to protect their interests while simultaneously claiming to be champions of human rights on the global stage. These countries response to the deterioration of human rights in Bahrain has been weak. This, coupled with the lack of effective criticism by fellow member states in UN forums, has emboldened Bahrain further.

A more robust and comprehensive action from the UN is long overdue to increase the visibility of crimes being committed in Bahrain, focused on the issue of citizenship revocation, travel ban, arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances.

ICSFT calls on the Government of Bahrain to:

Reverse the court's decision and immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners, and to end impunity for crimes committed by security forces;

¹ On 31 December, the Cassation Court upheld a five-year sentence against him for his tweets criticizing the practice in Bahrain and the Saudi-led Yemen war. This verdict is final and cannot be appealed

² Bahrain's Supreme Court upheld a life sentence for Shia opposition leader Sheikh Ali Salman over fabricated and politically motivated charges of spying for neighboring Qatar. Sheikh Ali Salman is currently serving a four-year sentence in a separate case – "inciting hatred" in the kingdom. Sheikh Ali Salman's aides Ali al-Aswad and Hassan Sultan, who are former MPs and currently reside outside Bahrain and had been sentenced to life in absentia, also lost their right to appeal. The verdicts issued by the supreme court are final and cannot be appealed

Reverse all death sentences and sign relevant conventions that promote and protect human rights including the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;

Rescind the decision to dissolve Al-Wefaq and Wa'ad, the two opposition political groups, and ensure the right to freedom of expression and association in the country as per international law;

Cease targeting Sheikh Salman and other political activists in Bahrain and guarantee their freedom of expression and association;

Ensure that political societies and rights groups are able to conduct their work in a safe and enabling environment, without fear of reprisal;

Finally to this profoundly damaging trend of reprisal and to facilitate effective and genuine engagement with rights groups, civil society, opposition parties, and the international human rights mechanisms;
