



General Assembly

Distr.: General
8 June 2021

English only

Human Rights Council

Forty-seventh session

21 June–9 July 2021

Agenda item 2

**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain Inc, 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.

[31 May 2021]

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

Systematic Denial of COVID-19 Outbreak in Jau Prison in Bahrain

Outbreak of Coronavirus in Jau Prison

Between February and March 2021, ADHRB noted several discrepancies between the Jau Prison administration's narrative and the information collected by activists and families of political prisoners. On one hand, the administration has confirmed having done routine testing and having recorded 3 cases of COVID-19 among the inmates. On the other hand, activists and families confirmed that 84 political prisoners tested positive for COVID-19 in Jau Prison. This shows that the administration is actively concealing the actual figures. One reason behind this behavior might be the prevention of a scandal ahead of the Formula 1 Grand Prix that took place in Manama between the 26th and 27th of March.

The figures pertaining to the COVID-19 outbreak in Jau Prison are being collected by activists and the family members of political prisoners. To do so, they are using the outlet available on the website of the Ministry of Health (MoH) which shows the test results of all Bahraini citizens. However, activists are being told by authorities that information about the virus in Jau is "restricted," and are being advised to consult the Ministry of Interior (MoI)'s Instagram account for updates. Despite disruptions and suspensions of the MoH's website for several consecutive days, as of April 6, 2021, 84 political prisoners had tested positive for COVID-19. Notwithstanding the fact that information about the COVID-19 outbreak entered the public sphere, Jau Prison authorities have undertaken no measures to reassure the families or provide them with further information about the inmates' conditions and investigate how it started. Furthermore, State authorities avoid referring to the current number of active cases, and maintain that prisoners in Jau Prison are being treated humanely and allowed to keep contact with their families. President of the National Institute for Human Rights (NIHR), Maria Khoury, confirmed that all the infected inmates had immediately received the necessary medical care, and denied any deficiencies in the rights of inmates to have access to care.

Despite the narrative propagated by Bahraini authorities, they have failed to show any semblance of an organized system to treat COVID-19 patients, and have not shared any information with regard to the treatment provided to inmates or the location of the isolation and quarantine facilities. Some of those whose cases became critical were transferred to Building 18—a building normally used for isolation—while others, such as Sheikh Hasan Isa, were transferred to Salmaniya Hospital. Others were left in solitary confinement and were not provided with medical treatment.

With an official capacity of 1,201, Jau Prison is now conservatively estimated to be holding 2,700 inmates. Building 21 holds 478 inmates, 33% over-capacity, and it is currently where the outbreak has hit hardest, although there are also reports of people being infected in Buildings 13, 14, and 23. Despite the prison's overcrowding and COVID-19 outbreak, authorities continue to bring in new inmates.

The measures put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have been counterproductive on several levels. For example, due to canteen restrictions, inmates were not able to purchase sanitary and hygiene products, which lead to an outbreak of scabies. Currently, prisoners are being kept in isolation in their cells and are only allowed to go out for 15 minutes each day. Inmates are rarely and irregularly allowed to reach out to their families. The administration has recently started to feed inmates one meal per day and to give spoiled food. Political prisoners who have managed to talk to their families have expressed severe hunger. Furthermore, these measures have led to severe psychological distress, which became evident with the latest suicide attempt. The mother of the inmate who attempted suicide has accused the administration of being responsible for his desperate action.

Authorities' Responses to Peaceful Demonstrations

Because of authorities' persistent refusal to cooperate and communicate with the families of prisoners, families have gathered to peacefully protest and demand, at the very least, information about the whereabouts and wellbeing of their relatives, and at best, their unconditional release. Protesters also remind the world that inmates' health has been exhausted by years of torture, inhumane conditions, and the systematic denial of their right to medical treatment. Peaceful demonstrations took place in 24 areas across Bahrain, and 48 demonstrations were recorded on the single day of Friday, April 2. Daily marches, sit-ins, and human chains were mainly composed of wives and mothers.

In response to these peaceful demonstrations, and despite the aforementioned worrying figures and uneven measures, Muhammad Al-Sisi Al-Buainain, the Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the Bahraini House of Representatives, condemned the "politicized campaigns that the administration is being exposed to" that aim at spreading false information to destabilize the security of the country. On a similar note, on March 31, the MoI issued a statement warning against these attempts to "politicize the conditions of inmates, exploit the feelings of families, and generate sympathy through groups and individuals working against national agendas." The MOI further threatened legal action against those who, responding to these calls for mobilization, went against the law.

On April 4, the National Taskforce for Combatting Coronavirus held a press conference to discuss the updates of the pandemic in Bahrain. The Head of General Security, Tarek Bin Hasan Al-Hasan, maintained that the prison administration abided by international standards and provided no further information about the situation in Jau Prison.

On April 6, ten individuals were summoned for questioning at police station 17 in Hamad Town. Each of these individuals had either voiced their concerns due to the lack of communication with the inmates or participated in the demonstrations. Among them, Ali Muhanna, father of Husain Muhanna, had complained that his son was denied contact with his family in retaliation for telling them that the administration was not providing the inmates their meals. A number of these individuals were later arrested, including the brothers of prisoner Mohamed Daqqaq, Anwar and Yaser, who protested their concern for his health situation, as he suffers from sickle cell anemia.

Conclusion and Recommendations

After years of arbitrary arrests, torture, ill-treatment, and systematic denial to health care, political prisoners face a new challenge in Bahraini prisons. The COVID-19 pandemic presents a new level of victimization and vulnerability. Political prisoners and their loved ones entirely depend on the prison administration and State authorities. However, these entities have taken advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to further weaponize healthcare and politicize the pandemic. They have obscured the actual figures, refused to treat inmates with adequate medical care, and have arrested peaceful demonstrators.

For these reasons, ADHRB calls on the Government of Bahrain to:

- Require Jau Prison's administration to provide the families of inmates with accurate and verifiable information regarding their health conditions;
- Grant visitation rights and regular calls to the families of inmates;
- Treat inmates with respect and uphold basic human rights obligations like providing regular food, sanitation resources, and necessary and adequate medical care, taking into consideration previous and chronic diseases;
- Release all political prisoners immediately and unconditionally, giving priority to those who are in higher risk categories in relation to COVID-19 as well as those whose health has been exhausted by years of torture and inhumane conditions;
- Immediately release all family members and activists who were arrested in retaliation for voicing their concerns for prisoners' conditions.