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Anticlimactic arrest, hospitable detention after days of demonstration

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Feb. 17, 2012

Brian Terrell in 2010 (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

Brian Terrell, 55, arrived in Bahrain on Feb. 10 and remained there as an international human rights observer until he was deported five days later. A Catholic Worker farmer and veteran peace activist, Terrell has participated in human rights delegations to Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel/Palestine, Central America and Chiapas, Mexico.

Terrell, who is also a co-coordinator of the Chicago-based peace group Voices for Creative Nonviolence [1], said he was in the office when Bahraini human rights activist Nabeel Rajab called in late January requesting international observers to come to Bahrain. Terrell decided to go because "this was a call for help ... I knew that professional international observers from human rights groups were being barred from the country. I thought, 'Somebody needed to be there.'"

For more on Terrell's arrest, and to learn about the five other Americans who were also deported, see **Six American activists arrested in, deported from Bahrain** [2].

Shortly after his return to the United States, Terrell spoke to *NCR* by phone. Following is that interview, edited for clarity and length.

***NCR*: What were the circumstances of your arrest?**

Terrell: It was anticlimactic after my action-packed days. We were going to be driving in a caravan to the Pearl Roundabout [the focal point of Bahrain's anti-government protests in 2011].

The government, as much as the demonstrators, has made a fetish out of processions to the Pearl Roundabout. It

was a beautiful park. They have just obliterated it. They have soldiers camped out there 24/7. They have soldiers standing around the perimeter standing with guns, live ammunition, trying to keep anyone from getting there.

In our caravan, the car that I was in somehow got ahead of the others. We missed it and looked behind us and saw police and armored cars going the other way on the road very, very fast. We turned around directly behind us and saw a wall of tear gas.

The way they use tear gas in Bahrain is like nowhere else. It is not just for crowd control. It is a chemical weapon for collective punishment. Several times during our visit, we were attacked with tear gas grenades. It isn't to make you scatter. If you go down the road, there will be police coming in the other direction with the tear gas. So they are really trying to get you with this tear gas.

Can you tell me more about what happened next?

All over town, people were coming from different directions, trying to get to the Pearl Roundabout and facing attacks with tear gas, possible arrests and beatings. We did get a cellphone call from our friends and tried to meet up with them. They were with the group accompanying Nabeel Rajab and other high-profile Bahraini activists and had been arrested.

Finally, we got out of the car and decided to go on foot. We got off the main road where there was nothing going on. There was no traffic. The police pulled us over and asked for our identification. They were very, very polite. They assured us this would be very brief. They just wanted to check things out.

After 30 minutes, it got to be clear they were looking for us, that we were a real high priority. This was a huge day with a huge police presence, but there were a whole bunch of cops with some pretty high-ranking officers who were called in when we were apprehended.

The police put us in this room that was very tastefully decorated, with couches and easy chairs and a big widescreen TV. They put three very young policewomen to guard us.

I have not heard everything about what happened to Huwaida and Radhika [American observers who were arrested and deported Feb. 12], but their treatment was pretty severe. Their laptops, cameras, cellphones were confiscated and never returned. They were in handcuffs on their seven-hour flight to London. And I think whoever thought that was a good idea wasn't on the scene anymore.

So we were treated properly. They were very, very gentle. They called us in one at a time. A man from the Ministry of Information told us we had violated the terms of our visas. He pointed out we weren't staying in the hotel we had registered to stay in. I said, "We know this is not what this is about."

"Yeah, you are right," he said. "It is because you are attending demonstrations that are illegal."

I said, "I don't think they are illegal. Bahrain is a signatory to the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is being violated by the government."

Anyway, they told us pretty much they would put us on a plane at 2 o'clock in the morning and that they would get us a ticket to any city in the U.S. that we wanted to go to.

Why do you say the arrest was anticlimactic?

We were arrested just walking down a road, walking down a city street, blocks away from any of the action. A police officer saw us and wondered what these Americans were doing here. We weren't taken out of a

demonstration. It was just the curiosity of a bunch of Americans walking down a street.

I was almost caught two days before. That evening, I was sitting in a Costa coffee shop where people sit and watch the demonstrations. We were watching this back-and-forth between the police and demonstrators when someone invited me to go to a demonstration.

I get in a car with a young woman in her 20s and we go to this village, A'ali. In the village there are burial mounds that are four to five thousand years old and the town is built around these towns, a typical Middle Eastern town.

We arrive after dark, three of us in the car. We see a contingent of riot police walking on foot and a bunch of police cars. Everyone is communicating via texts and cellphones about where they see the cops. Then these cars converge on this alley and I see 50 young men who have put on shrouds, wrapped themselves in sheets, to show they are willing to die for the cause. They are chanting and the scene almost has the feel of Halloween. I walk behind with the two young women, the only women in the group. It is very dark.

The first time I realize we are encountering the police is when we see tear gas canisters all over our feet. We start running and scattering. The women are pulling me along. Around the corner is an open door where we duck in and watch the police going by. We are in the hallway of somebody's house and the family is in the next room, ignoring what is going on. One of the young women in the family says, "Welcome to my home."

Our hearts are beating because of the fear, our running and the gas. That night, the women found a place for me in the village in the home of total strangers -- a wonderful family.

Do you regret going?

Oh no. I am really energized by it all, more than my visits to other places over the last years. In Afghanistan and Iraq, I would see just a few very inspiring heroic individuals and small communities who are trying to make a difference, to change things for the better, and who have a vision for something different.

In Bahrain, it is like a whole population. To be among thousands of people who are willing to face tear gas, long sentences and beatings -- the crazy brutality of this insane regime -- and doing it over and over and over again was just amazing.

After Huwaida and Radhika were arrested, we knew the government knew we were in Bahrain and there was a high likelihood of getting arrested. Everybody we talked to after the arrest of the two women knew who we were. They saw Americans among them and they identified us with these two American women who were apparently arrested for intervening and asking questions when some local people were being arrested. They saw that as a sign of solidarity. People took very good care of us.

A beautiful thing that I will always remember is that every night at 10 o'clock people would be on their rooftops and yelling out *Allahu akbar* -- God is great -- for half an hour, over and over again.

That was a very thrilling thing to hear. The tone of the prayer would change over the half-hour. Sometimes it sounded like a cry for help, sometimes it sounded like despair, but by the time it was over I just felt like everybody was giving everybody else energy and strength. I felt that by 10:30 that the last peals of *Allahu akbar* were more a victory prayer than an appeal for help.

More than any other trip I have taken, I felt really frightened on this one. But every time, I kept seeing acts of courage and generosity that I was very humbled and very encouraged.

On Monday [Feb. 13], there was a walk of thousands of demonstrators. That was the biggest tear gas attack that I saw. To see these young people, without masks, without gloves, just picking up these tear gas canisters and throwing them away. How can they do that?

[Claire Schaeffer-Duffy is a longtime *NCR* contributor. She writes from Worcester, Mass., where she lives and works at the Ss. Francis and Therese Catholic Worker.]

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