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Hunger strikes and political prisoners in Bahrain and the West Bank

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Apr. 18, 2012 NCR Today

Bahraini human rights activist Abdulhadi al-Khawaja is beginning the 10th week of a hunger strike at a military prison hospital in Bahrain. Family members and his lawyer fear he could be close to death.

Al-Khawaja, 52, was arrested and tortured last spring amid a government crackdown against a popular uprising calling for reform of Bahrain's Sunni-led monarchy. In June, a military court convicted him of "organizing and managing a terrorist organization" and sentenced him to life imprisonment. He launched his hunger strike -- the fourth since his detention -- to demand his release and the release of all Bahraini political prisoners of conscience.

Al-Khawaja is a highly regarded human rights leader, and news of his deteriorating health has intensified the international campaign for his release. From 2002 to 2008, he co-founded and served as the first president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, and most recently worked as the Middle East and North Africa project's coordinator for Front Line Defenders. The Irish-based human rights organization has created a video to publicize his case:

Last week, Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt urged Bahrain to release the jailed activist, who has dual citizenship, saying he was in "very critical" condition. The prime minister's appeal came after a judicial panel refused Denmark's request for custody.

On Monday, two protesters draped a banner from the roof of the Bahraini Embassy in London that bore an image of al-Khawaja and imprisoned Bahraini Shi'ite opposition leader Hussan Mushaima. "Over 60 days on hunger strike," the banner read in reference to al-Khawaja. Amnesty International just issued an action alert and petition on his behalf and Wednesday, Germany's top human rights official, Markus Loening, called on Bahrain to release al-Khawaja and the "few hundred protestors" still imprisoned more than a year after the Arab Spring demonstrations.

All this publicity comes days before Bahrain is scheduled to host the Grand Prix. The royal family is reportedly divided on whether to release the jailed human rights activist. They publicly insist his situation is not grave because he is receiving fluid through IVs, but photos of the emaciated al-Khawaja widely circulated online don't support that description.

The al-Khalifa monarchy's continued imprisonment of a man who has been internationally recognized for his human rights work in the Arab world starkly exposes its lack of commitment to reform. An independent commission of inquiry into the government crackdown on the Shi'ite-led democracy protests of last spring recommended that all those who had been tried in military courts, including al-Khawaja, have their cases reviewed by ordinary courts. Although the Bahraini government accepted the inquiry's findings and recommendations, the reviews have not yet happened, says Front Line Defenders. Meanwhile, Amnesty International, in its 58-page report on Bahrain, says it continues "to receive reports of torture and use of unnecessary and excessive force against protests."

"My father doesn't want to end his life. He wants to end injustice and violence against the Bahraini people," wrote al-Khawaja's daughter, Maryam, in the Amnesty International alert demanding her father's release.

"As controversy swirls around Bahrain's plan to host the Grand Prix auto race this month, Bahraini authorities desperately try to assure the world that all is back to 'business as usual.' But the people of Bahrain continue to call for change, and my father may pay for this goal with his life."

Over in Bethlehem, my friend and human rights activist Mazin Qumsiyeh reported that on Tuesday, 50 internationals, most of them from France, were being held in Givon Prison in Israel "simply because they wanted to visit us in our large prison in the West Bank."

The detained were among the 1,500 activists who attempted to openly visit the West Bank this week as part of Welcome to Palestine 2012, a nonviolent initiative challenging Israeli control of travel to the occupied Palestinian territory. Israeli blacklisting prevented hundreds of activists from leaving their departure points in Europe while others were stopped at Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv.

Many of those detained at the Israeli prison reportedly refused food in solidarity with the more than 1,200 Palestinian prisoners who launched an open-ended hunger strike [1] on Tuesday, Palestinians' annual Prisoners Day, to protest treatment of political prisoners under the Israeli regime.

An SMS from a group of the imprisoned activists posted on the International Middle East Media Center [2] on Monday read:

"We are 13 girls in Lyon, Scottish 4, 2, Nice, Marseille 2, 3 in Paris, one of Quebec, one of Corsica, and they still don't let us call without giving us any explanation. We all go on a hunger strike as long as we cannot call. And tomorrow we will all go on a hunger strike with the Palestinian women prisoners."

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[1] http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/some-1-200-palestinian-prisoners-go-on-open-ended-hunger-strike-1.424811
[2] http://www.imemc.org/article/63317