

Rep. James P. McGovern (MA)
TLHRC Hearing: Human Rights in Bahrain
B-318 Rayburn HOB
Friday, May 13, 2011
10:00 AM-12:00 PM

Good morning. I want to thank everyone for being here this morning at the end of a very hectic week in Congress. I would like to thank the staff of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, in particular, Mike McVicker, for coordinating this hearing, and I especially want to thank our witnesses for their attendance.

A little over a year ago, under the leadership of Executive Committee member Congresswoman Donna Edwards, the Commission held a hearing on human rights in Bahrain. That hearing looked at labor rights, the situation of migrant workers, and human trafficking. It noted the many efforts by the Government of Bahrain to address these human rights challenges, and the many challenges that remain.

Today's hearing will again review the status of human rights in Bahrain, but this time with an emphasis on what has occurred during the last three months. In a relatively short time span, there have been serious allegations of grave human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings; torture; arbitrary arrest and detention; attacks on medical personnel to prevent them from treating wounded individuals; detention and abuse of female teachers and schoolgirls; lack of due process in criminal proceedings; destruction of religious sites; dismissal from jobs based on religious affiliation; and other forms of harassment directed by the Bahraini government against political opponents, many of whom are from the Shi'a majority. These allegations need to be explored and the Commission will attempt to begin that process today.

Although human rights can have a political dimension, the Commission does not take a "pro-government" or "anti-government"

stance on broader political issues in Bahrain. Bahrain's political future is a matter for the people of Bahrain to determine. As a human rights commission, we are "pro-human rights," regardless of politics, religion, race or ethnicity. That will be our focus today and always.

The United States and Bahrain have an important friendship that serves the needs and interests of both countries. Also, during the last decade, Bahrain has shown a willingness to address human rights issues in a constructive manner. It is important to recognize and appreciate those facts.

However, there are times when one friend needs to tell another that something is wrong – and this is one of those times. As the Wall Street Journal noted earlier this week, Bahrain is indeed a friend, but it does not deserve "a pass" on human rights issues.

I think it might be helpful, and serve to strengthen the Bahraini government's international relations, to allow the International Committee for the Red Cross, or the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, or an appropriate U.N. human rights special rapporteur, to travel to Bahrain, visit detainees and provide an objective assessment of their physical security and the judicial process that will determine their future.

Every nation faces human rights challenges, including my own, and it's important for Members of Congress to learn about them, not just to criticize, but to help governments, NGOs and international organizations work together to find legal, peaceful solutions to long-standing abuses and restrictions on human rights.

I'd like to end my remarks by noting a couple of things. First – about my own government – I was expecting at least one, possibly two witnesses from the State Department to testify. Regrettably, over the past 72 hours, we were informed that no one in any of the bureaus is available today. I regret that the State Department is unable to appear.

Second – I’d like to thank the staff of the Commission and the staff in my personal office for talking to the many individuals who called from Bahrain to express their views about the complex situation in Bahrain. The callers were respectful, calm and very clear about their concerns. The same is true with the many emails my office has received that express a wide diversity of views within Bahrain on human rights and what has been taking place there since February.

I can’t express how much I appreciate these individuals taking the time to contact me and my staff.

In the past two days, however, the tenor of some communications has changed. It became clear that unlike the many other phone calls and emails I had been receiving, these calls were orchestrated. They followed a similar script; they asserted the hearing was anti-government; and they based that assertion on the ethnicity and religion of one of our witnesses. These callers, however, were also very respectful and seemed to appreciate the fact that the topic of human rights broadly speaking was going to be explored at today’s hearing.

The Commission does not call representatives of foreign governments to testify at hearings. This is not specific to Bahrain – from China to Colombia, from Iran to Vietnam, from Sri Lanka to Morocco, our position is the same. Governments have significant access and resources to present their point of view to the media and to U.S. and international officials. Like Bahrain, they are often aided by one or more public relations firms. The Commission, as an entity dedicated to human rights, is often a forum where the voices of the voiceless are provided an opportunity to be heard.

Having said that, we invited the Government of Bahrain to enter a statement into the Record of this hearing, and I would like to officially submit that statement for the Record. Copies are also available on the literature table.

I am also submitting for the Record a May 11th press release from Amnesty International regarding the trials of opposition leaders in Bahrain; a May 12th release by Human Rights First on torture and trials of protesters in Bahrain the April 21st report of the AFL-CIO regarding the Government of Bahrain's failure to comply with agreements under the U.S.-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement; and an April report by Doctors Without Borders on violations against the medical community.

I very much look forward to hearing from today's witnesses from two NGOs, one of which has investigated the general human rights allegations and the other which has examined the particularly troubling targeting of medical personnel. Moreover, I am particularly pleased to hear from a member of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights whose father is currently detained in Bahrain under circumstances which indicate torture and other abuse.

I would like to recognize my colleague Congressman McDermott to make his opening remarks. Thank you.