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One Hundred and Twelfth Congress
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Statement of Rep. James P. McGovern
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing
“Implementation of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry
Report”
2237 Rayburn HOB – Wednesday, August 1, 2012 – 1:00-3:00 PM

Thank you all for being here today for this important hearing on human rights in Bahrain, with a focus on implementation of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry report. I would like to thank the staff of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for coordinating this hearing, and I want to thank our witnesses for testifying and for their leadership in raising awareness about the human rights situation in Bahrain.

Fourteen months ago, the Lantos Commission held a hearing on human rights in Bahrain. At that hearing, we learned that the Bahraini government had engaged in a harsh crackdown after the outbreak of major protests early in 2011.

In June 2011, the King of Bahrain appointed an independent commission, chaired by international law expert Dr. Cherif Bassiouni, to investigate the government’s response to the unrest in Bahrain. Last November, this Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry – or BICI [Bee-eye-see-eye] – issued its report, which found that Bahraini authorities systematically used excessive force, torture and forced confessions against protesters; unjustly prosecuted medical personnel who treated injured protesters; and fired many employees suspected of sympathizing with the opposition.

The Commission also issued 28 recommendations designed to bolster human rights protections and remedy abuses. In the nine months since the release of the BICI report, the Bahraini government has taken positive steps to implement some of these proposals, including the transfer of some trials from military to civilian courts, the reinstatement of some fired workers, and the production of a new code

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of police conduct. But those reforms are incomplete, and I am very concerned that some of the most important recommendations – in particular, the recommendations calling for accountability at all levels of the chain of command for human rights abuses, the release of individuals who have only engaged in peaceful political expression, and integration of all Bahraini communities into the security forces – have not been implemented.

More generally, I am very concerned that the human rights situation in Bahrain has deteriorated in recent months. Credible reports indicate that government security forces have been using deadly tear gas excessively, beating protesters outside of formal detention centers, and harassing injured protesters seeking emergency medical care. Bahraini authorities also appear to be stepping up their repression of activists and opposition leaders. I am very troubled that Nabeel Rajab has been sentenced to three months in prison even though the Bahraini government has presented no credible evidence that he has advocated or engaged in violence. Mr. Rajab and all detainees who have only engaged in peaceful political expression should be immediately released.

On the other hand, some protesters are engaging in violent attacks on security personnel, and such violence is also completely unacceptable. The use of violence by protesters or by security forces is counterproductive and only strengthens hardliners on both sides.

I would also like to make a plea at this hearing for the Bahraini government to allow nongovernmental organizations greater access to Bahrain. Bahraini authorities have placed significant restrictions on NGO visits and denied a number of NGO requests for visas. This does not help the Bahraini government's cause, as it creates an impression that the government has something to hide.

Finally, I want to say a word about U.S. arms sales to Bahrain. I firmly believe that the United States should not provide any military items or services to Bahrain until there is important and lasting progress on human rights in Bahrain. I

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understand the close security relationship between the United States and Bahrain, but I believe that U.S. security interests in the Middle East will be best served by the implementation of reforms that give all Bahraini communities greater confidence in the Bahraini government and help to unify the Bahraini people. I urge the administration to withhold any further arms sales to Bahrain until there is major progress toward full implementation of all of the BICI recommendations.

WITNESSES

I would now like to turn to our witnesses. Along with their oral testimony, I would submit into the Record any written testimony provided by them.

I also want to submit into the Record statements provided to the Commission by:

- Congressman Jim McDermott
- The Bahraini Ambassador to the United States, Houda Ezra Ebrahim Nonoo
- Husain Abdulla of Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain
- Brian Dooley of Human Rights First
- Walid Maalouf

And I want to submit into the Record the report “Weaponizing Tear Gas,” published today by Physicians for Human Rights.

I would like to welcome our first witness: U.S. Senator Ron Wyden.

Senator Wyden, I am grateful to you for your leadership in seeking to prioritize human rights in U.S. policy toward Bahrain. It has been my pleasure to

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work with you in introducing in the House and Senate a Joint Resolution that would prohibit U.S. arms sales to Bahrain from proceeding until certain human rights conditions were met. I appreciate your willingness to join us this afternoon to offer your perspective.