

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on Bahrain

Senator Ron Wyden
As prepared for delivery

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Good afternoon everyone. I'd like to thank the Tom Lantos Commission on Human Rights for organizing this important hearing to help refocus the spotlight on Bahrain.

The root causes of the severe unrest Bahrain has experienced for the last 17 months remain unaddressed and unresolved. These problems are political in nature and thus require a political solution.

In November of last year, the King took the extraordinary step of setting up the Bahrain Commission of Independent Inquiry. The Commission was not perfect. It was limited in scope, but it at least resulted in a number of practical recommendations.

Unfortunately, instead of the Government taking sufficient action to answer the demands of the largely peaceful protests, we have seen 17 months of inaction and foot-dragging. The result has been more frustration and a downward spiral of back-and-forth violence between fringe protestors and the Bahraini police force.

Targeting children and jailing Nabeel Rajab, the President of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, simply for criticizing the Bahraini government on Twitter is not progress. Instead, it underscores what Human Rights Watch rightfully considers an escalating trend of attempting to silence dissidents and members of civil society groups.

The BICI report explicitly recommended that the Government of Bahrain review convictions, commute sentences and drop outstanding charges against all persons charged with offenses involving non-violent political expression.

Instead, the government is continuing to arrest and imprison Bahraini citizens for expressing political views the government doesn't agree with.

Unfortunately, the United States is rewarding this bad behavior by continuing to move forward with arms sales to Bahrain.

Our government should not be rewarding regimes that are systemically and often times violently, repressing the democratic demands of its own citizens.

I understand that most – but not all – of the items being sold to the Bahrainis are for external defense capabilities and not crowd control.

My concern is what message does this send to the wider region, and to the world at large, when America – that country revered for its values and commitment to freedom – looks the other way when democratic aspirations are crushed and peaceful activists are repeatedly hauled off to jail?

It also doesn't help that one of the recipients of these items was the Bahrain Defense Force, a government entity that was implicated in the deaths of unarmed protestors by the BICI report.

As a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Bahrain is obligated to protect the right of all to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

Bahrain is also obliged to abide by the United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms, which require that law enforcement officers use force only to the extent necessary to achieve lawful purposes, and wherever possible, only after using warnings that it is about to be used.

Bahrain is clearly not abiding by either of these.

This is not encouraging.

This is not progress.

To make matters worse, the Government of Bahrain recently moved to deny all requests for permits for peaceful protests since the end of June. This includes not allowing the opposition al-Wefaq and other organized groups to peacefully assemble in any part of the country. Surely, this is

counterproductive, and runs the risk that Bahrainis will become even further disenchanted with the pace of reform, thus potentially turning peaceful moderates into extremists.

Time is running out for a real, sustainable, political solution to be reached in Bahrain.

As the regime continues its pattern of abuse, violence and foot-dragging on democratic reforms, I think the United States needs to use all of its levers of influence with the Bahrainis.

As the Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on International Trade, I believe that one of these levers available is to ensure that Bahrain's labor commitments pursuant to the U.S. Bahrain Free Trade Agreement are fully implemented.

There is evidence that the government denied public sector workers the right to organize or strike. Trade union leaders were also arrested, harassed, prosecuted and intimidated.

Furthermore, more than 2,800 workers were dismissed or suspended during the uprisings last year, affecting more than 14,000 family members. Called out for its actions against these workers, the Government of Bahrain claims to have hired many of the workers back. However the reality is that the workers were reassigned to lower paying jobs or jobs that do not match their skill set and often forced to sign loyalty oaths.

The actions of the Bahraini government are concerning because they flagrantly violate the human rights of Bahrainis. But America must also be aware that Bahrain is becoming more fractured and less stable. And if the U.S. continues to blindly support the regime, we run the risk of turning a population that has been friendly to the U.S. military presence on the island against us.

The United States needs to make very clear to the government of Bahrain that it is time to reach a political solution by negotiating in good faith with the opposition.