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Under the Gun: Ongoing Assaults on Bahrain's Health System

Physicians for Human Rights
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Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) is an independent, non-profit organization that uses medical and scientific expertise to investigate human rights violations and advocate for justice, accountability, and the health and dignity of all people. We are supported by the expertise and passion of health professionals and concerned citizens alike.

Since 1986, PHR has conducted investigations in more than 40 countries around the world, including Afghanistan, Burma, Bahrain, Libya, Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, the United States, the former Yugoslavia, and Zimbabwe.

- 1988 — First to document Iraq's use of chemical weapons against Kurds
- 1996 — Exhumed mass graves in the Balkans
- 1996 — Produced critical forensic evidence of genocide in Rwanda
- 1997 — Shared the Nobel Peace Prize for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines
- 2003 — Warned of health and human rights catastrophe prior to the invasion of Iraq
- 2004 — Documented and analyzed the genocide in Darfur
- 2005 — Detailed the story of tortured detainees in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay
- 2010 — Presented the first evidence showing that CIA medical personnel engaged in human experimentation on prisoners in violation of the Nuremberg Code and other provisions
- 2011 — Championed the principle of noninterference with medical services in times of armed conflict and civil unrest during the Arab Spring

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Introduction

In February 2011, protesters in Bahrain took to the streets to demand political reform. The Government of Bahrain responded by attacking protesters with tear gas, bird shot, and other weapons, detaining and torturing perceived opponents, and targeting health professionals who treated protesters.

Following international pressure from governments, human rights defenders, and other members of civil society, the King of Bahrain established the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), chaired by international law expert M. Cherif Bassiouni, to investigate allegations of abuses.

The Commission investigated events surrounding the Government's crackdown in February and March of 2011 and issued its findings in November of that year. The final report details myriad abuses on the part of the Bahraini security forces, including acts of torture and excessive use of force.

The Government of Bahrain then established a National Commission to implement recommendations from the BICI final report, but the Government has yet to take substantive action on key recommendations. Since the crackdown began in 2011, Bahraini security forces continue to operate in a system of impunity.

It is within this overall culture of repression that the Government of Bahrain militarized its health system.

On 16 March 2011, the Bahraini government invited 1,500 Arab Gulf-state soldiers (two-thirds from Saudi Arabia) into the Kingdom. It also stationed light infantry tanks outside the country's largest hospital—the sprawling Salmaniya Medical Complex—which employs some 4,000 staff. At the same time, the Government of Bahrain sent its own heavily armed and masked security forces inside hospital wards where they beat, tortured, and interrogated wounded protesters and the medical workers who treated them. Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) documented these serious breaches of medical neutrality in its April 2011 report, *Do No Harm: A Call for Bahrain to End Systematic Attacks on Doctors and Patients*.

Militarization of Bahrain's public health system

Two PHR investigators, Holly Atkinson, MD, and Richard Sollom, MPH, returned to Bahrain in April 2012 to assess the current human rights situation and to investigate potential ongoing violations of medical neutrality in Bahrain since April 2011. The team conducted 102 in-depth qualitative interviews, examined medical records and radiographic images, conducted two site visits to Salmaniya Hospital and an “underground clinic,” and interviewed patients, doctors, and government officials.



A Bahraini doctor holds a sign in front of the Ministry of Labour in Isa Town, south of the capital Manama, during a demonstration of Shiite employees who were dismissed from their jobs. His sign says “Consulting Neurosurgeon, Salmaniya Medical Complex, Suspended for Treating Wounded Protesters, 5 May 2011.” Photo: AFP/Getty Images

Under the principle of medical neutrality, State authorities must ensure safe access to medical facilities and transport, and ensure the safety of medical workers and their patients. At the same time, medical workers must provide impartial care to all who seek their help. Over the past 14 months, however, the Government of Bahrain has denied a largely Shia segment of its population these rights, resulting in widespread fear among many who seek medical treatment.

According to over a dozen sick and wounded civilians whom PHR investigators interviewed in April 2012, this fear is due to:

- the ongoing presence of State security forces inside Salmaniya Hospital
- the systematic interrogation of incoming patients and visitors, and
- the subsequent beating, detention, and prosecution of many Shia who are suspected of having participated in street protests.

In addition to conducting 102 interviews, PHR investigators visited Salmaniya Hospital twice in April 2012 and confirmed eyewitness accounts that two to four Bahraini national guards man each of the nine exterior gates into Salmaniya Medical Complex.

According to four family members of patients of Salmaniya Hospital whom PHR interviewed, guards stop all incoming cars and pedestrians. They first ask each person his or her name and village of residence, from which the guards can easily discern whether that person is likely Shia or Sunni. Next, the guards demand to know from visitors the reason they are there, and from incoming patients the nature of their medical issues. Anyone presenting with physical wounds or suspected teargas-related injury is brought to security forces inside Salmaniya Hospital for further interrogation. Three patients also reported that anyone driving a wounded protester to Salmaniya Hospital is suspect, and one such person was even accused of having caused the injury. Throughout the hospital, there are now 400 newly installed security cameras operated by the Ministry of Interior, according to an engineer PHR interviewed.

The CEO of Salmaniya Medical Complex, Dr. Waleed Khalifa al-Manea, confirmed such systematic interrogation and told PHR investigators that he had personally raised the issue of ongoing interrogation of patients inside the hospital with the Ministry of Interior and urged it to stop. PHR is still receiving reports at the time of this writing that interrogations persist inside the government-run hospital.

Jassam, a 20-year-old student, reported that after police had detained and tortured him, they transferred him to a military hospital because of his serious condition. There, he said, a state prosecutor interrogated him and threatened to bring back the police to beat him more if he did not sign a pre-typed confession. Jassam refused to sign it until he had a defense attorney look at it. The prosecutor replied, "I don't need your signature in any case." Jassam was discharged on 8 March 2012 and went into hiding.

Bahraini authorities with whom PHR investigators spoke point out that they have a duty to provide security at state-run medical facilities. But by using this obligation as a pretext for militarizing medical facilities, the Bahraini government is instilling fear among a wide sector of society that is afraid to seek necessary medical care, thus worsening health outcomes.

A 20-year-old male from Hamad Town reported to PHR that he was too afraid to go to Salmaniya Hospital even though he had been severely wounded. He had taken part in a peaceful protest on 9 February 2012 in Karbabad. The police arrived shortly after the protest began and started to chase the protesters. He fled into a friend's home where he and several other protesters hid. The police began searching the neighbors' homes, and 30 minutes later they arrived at the house where this group of protesters was hiding.

Around three dozen police forced their way into the home, and some protesters ran to the second floor. Some of his fellow protesters tried to climb down from the roof top into the garden below. He was the last one on the rooftop. The police yelled at him, and then one of the police officers pushed him over the edge of the 20-foot-high roof.

He landed on his right elbow and saw that he was badly wounded. He could not move his hand. He did not go to the emergency room at Salmaniya Hospital for fear of being detained and tortured by security forces there. He said that he was afraid because he had protested and knew others who had gone to Salmaniya Hospital and were interrogated and immediately detained.

The incident took place late at night, and so his friends could not take him to a private hospital because none had emergency departments that could treat serious injuries. He had to wait until the next day to go to a private hospital where he underwent surgery. PHR investigators examined medical records and X-rays, which corroborate his testimony.

PHR investigators spoke with another 21-year-old man who was severely wounded during a peaceful protest in his village, Saar, on 28 January 2012.

He reported that police arrived and shot tear gas canisters directly at the crowd of 50-60 protesters. He heard shots being fired and saw thick clouds of yellow smoke in front of him.

About 30 seconds after they started firing the tear gas into the crowds, he was hit in the face with a tear gas canister. He immediately fell to the ground. His face was bloody and he couldn't see. He felt someone grab his arm and helped him up and took him to a nearby home. There they gave him first aid before transferring him to another home nearby where a doctor lived. The doctor cleaned the facial wounds, gave him an injection, and helped stop the bleeding.

When asked why he did not go to Salmaniya Hospital, he smiled as if it were a naïve question. He answered simply, "Because I'd be arrested." He was treated the next day at a private hospital. X-rays that PHR reviewed revealed broken facial bones, which corroborate his testimony.

PHR investigators in Bahrain separately interviewed four men in their twenties, from Karzakan village, who had all participated in the same peaceful protest in their town on 15 February 2012.

Sayed recounted how police blocked all entrances to the area with their vehicles, while other police continued on foot and chased down protesters. The four men ran inside a home to seek shelter, but the police stormed the building.

Sayed was the first of the four to get caught. He reported that one police took out a knife and stabbed him in his left shoulder and then plunged the knife a second time into his left upper back.

Sayed managed to escape and ran out the door. He called a paramedic friend who took him to a doctor's home for emergency care. When asked why he did not go to the ER at Salmaniya Hospital, Sayed laughed and said, "With these wounds, I'd be arrested." Physical examination revealed injuries highly consistent with his testimony.



A Bahraini Shiite Muslim boy holds an exploded tear gas canister in the capital Manama during an anti-government rally on March 29, 2012, against the excessive use of tear gas by Bahrain security forces to disperse demonstrations in Shiite villages. Photo: Getty Images

In Al Makasha, PHR investigators interviewed Mohamed, who had taken part in a peaceful demonstration on 17 February 2012, the one-year anniversary of last year's Pearl Roundabout demonstrations. He described how police beat him until he lost consciousness, but was later too afraid to go to Salmaniya Hospital for fear of detention and further torture.

Shortly after Mohamed and the other approximately 100 peaceful demonstrators began marching and chanting, Mohamed saw police in dark blue uniforms begin to chase after the crowd. One police officer beat Mohamed on his head using a black club. He fell to the ground and lost consciousness. He woke up several minutes later to find another police officer kicking him in the stomach, face, and both hands. He covered his face with his hands, but the police officer continued to kick him. Another police officer picked up a red brick and used it to hit Mohamed over the head. He then took out a knife and stabbed Mohamed three times in his right hip and buttocks while he was lying on the ground.

According to Mohamed, the officer twisted the knife after each of the three stabbings. Mohamed said he lost consciousness a second time. Mohamed believes the police left him for dead.

After they left the scene, a neighboring family came to help Mohamed and other wounded protesters. A doctor and nurse later sutured his wounds and gave him pain medication.

The next day, Mohamed's family took him to a private hospital where he was X-rayed and underwent surgery. Even though they had to pay for treatment, they preferred to take him there rather than to Salmaniya Hospital where he said he would have been arrested. PHR examined his wounds and medical records, which corroborate his testimony.

Fear of arrest at Salmaniya Hospital is reportedly so widespread that even people who have never protested are afraid to seek medical care there. One private-sector physician told PHR that he treats many injured patients who fear arrest at public hospitals, and so prefer to be seen by doctors like him.

Hassan, for example, had been studying abroad and returned to Bahrain on 3 April 2012. Three days later he was walking back home from visiting relatives in Sitra when he came upon a street protest. Although a bystander, he was shot at by police and was injured in his right foot. Fearing to go to a hospital, he waited for two days until the pain was too severe, and then went to a private clinic where his wound was sutured. Because he has diabetes, he faces further wound-healing complications.

Forty-five-year-old Ali reported that on 8 April 2012 he was filling his car with gasoline when a fire started, causing severe burns on his right lower leg. He refused to go to Salmaniya Hospital because he feared that security forces there would consider him to be a protester injured during a street demonstration.

Burn victims are especially fearful of interrogation and arrest at Salmaniya because of the increased use of "Molotov cocktails" by some protesters. PHR investigators spoke with one such protester who reported that he had unintentionally burned himself while throwing a hand-made incendiary bomb during a violent protest. He was also treated by a physician in private practice.

The increased use of private facilities among patients too afraid to seek treatment at Salmaniya Hospital led the Ministry of Health to issue a "circular" to all private hospitals and clinics, according to a focus group of eight physicians PHR surveyed. This 31 January 2012 Government circular stated that private hospitals and clinics were now obligated to report to Government security authorities all incoming patients "with injuries due to suspected criminal activities and/or accidents irrespective [of] their causes.... Violation of these requirements shall constitute collaboration with such activities and is criminalized by law."

This Ministerial law further militarizes health care by forcing medical workers to be agents of the state and by creating a conflict of dual loyalties, wherein health professionals have competing obligations to their patients and the government. As one doctor in private practice told PHR,

“I had to call the police because my patient had been hit by bird shot pellets. They arrived within 30 minutes and took him away.”

Another physician at a private hospital told PHR that some private clinics will not treat any patients with protest-related injuries. To protect his patients with such wounds—albeit at his own risk—he purposely omits writing in the medical record the patient’s history, cause of injury, or any other information related to excessive use of force by Bahraini security forces.

Although Government officials in Bahrain hasten to point out similar laws in the West that require, for example, reporting of gun-shot injuries, the obvious difference is that health workers in those countries do not hand over their patients to security forces who were responsible for causing the injuries and who then torture the sick and wounded. The 2012 Bahraini law not only subordinates the needs of the patient to that of the state, it propagates fear among the population.

A 27-year-old man named Ali reported to PHR that he came upon a street protest while walking near his home in Karanah on 22 March 2012. He said that as soon as he saw the protesters, he turned to walk away, but then police began firing tear gas from all directions.

Ali reported that one canister of tear gas suddenly smashed into his head, and he fell to the ground. When he regained consciousness, family members were surrounding him, wiping blood from his head and face. They carried him home and called a human rights activist whom they thought could recommend someone who would give Ali emergency care at home. A paramedic came to their house, provided first aid, and advised that Ali go to a private hospital for possible surgery. Knowing of the Government circular to private hospitals, Ali lied to the medical staff and said that he had fallen from a horse. (CT scan revealed internal hemorrhage and a fractured skull.)

The physician told Ali that because he had serious injuries, he had to report him to the authorities. Bahraini police arrived shortly thereafter and began to interrogate and video-record Ali while in the intensive care unit. One police asked Ali, “Do you want to apologize to the King now?” Ali replied that he had nothing to apologize for, that he was only on his way to eat when he happened upon the demonstration.

Next the police asked, “Why did you call Nabeel Rajab? Do you think Nabeel is more legitimate than the Government?” Ali answered, “He’s a human rights activist. He could help me. If I went to Salmaniya [Hospital] they’d arrest me.”

When they asked, “Who came to your home and stitched you?” he said that he “was too afraid to ask who he was.” The next day a forensic doctor from the Ministry of the Interior came to the hospital to examine Ali, and he told this doctor the truth, that he was hit in the head by a teargas canister.

The doctor took photographs of the wounds and said to Ali, “You’re lucky to have survived. Others from the same injury have died.” The MOI official then told Ali what he was going to report had happened: “The police fired up into the air, and the canister fell down and hit you on the head.”

Another patient, a 43-year-old mother, reported that she was too afraid to tell the truth at a state-run hospital of how she broke her foot. She recounted how on 14 February 2012 police attacked her home in Sanabis, firing two tear gas canisters inside her house. One hit her foot breaking several bones.

When she arrived at the Salmaniya Hospital emergency room, she lied and said she had fallen. “You cannot tell the truth at Salmaniya,” she said. She further explained that if she had admitted that police had broken her foot by shooting tear gas at her, she would have been arrested.

Not only patients, but medical workers as well are subjected to interrogation by Bahraini security forces. One senior surgeon whom PHR interviewed in a safe location reported that he had been summoned by the police and asked about a patient of his, “Why did you operate on this criminal?” He replied simply, “I am a doctor. I must treat everyone equally.”

“There is still much fear about Salmaniya,” according to one specialist physician who works both in private practice and at Salmaniya Hospital. Another doctor concluded that the events over the past year at Salmaniya Hospital have left an “indelible stain” on this once prestigious medical facility. Bahrain’s image will forever be tarnished, he noted, unless the government reverses course and ends militarization of healthcare.

Politicization of Bahrain’s public health system

To justify the militarization of Salmaniya Hospital, senior government authorities charged Shia health professionals with trying to take control of the medical complex, according to a group of eight physicians PHR surveyed.

Last year, Bahraini security forces targeted, detained, and tortured 48 of some of the country’s leading health professionals and forced them to sign confessions. A military court quickly convicted them on fabricated charges, including inciting hatred of the regime, occupying Salmaniya Hospital, and attempting to overthrow the Government.

These allegations were confirmed to be unfounded by the King of Bahrain’s own Commission of Inquiry. Under heightened international pressure last year, the Bahraini government transferred the medics’ trial from military to civilian court, released them on their own recognizance, suspended them from work, and restricted their travel. Twenty medical workers face felony charges and up to 15 years’ imprisonment; the other 28 face misdemeanor charges. Among these 48 medical workers, 47 are Shia.

PHR investigators spoke with a group of eight senior medical workers who have concluded that the Bahraini government, led by the Prime Minister and Minister of Interior, sought to take over the one last ministry outside Sunni control — the Ministry of Health, which until last year was seen as a Shia stronghold.

According to two other Bahraini sources whom PHR interviewed, hardliners within the Government took advantage of the chaos of the Arab Spring, detained and convicted some of the leading Shia physicians and nurses within the health ministry, and supplanted them with Sunni partisans. Many of these physicians were chairs of medical departments at Salmaniya Hospital, who were subsequently removed from those positions of authority.

The Ministry of Health, which oversees the administration of Salmaniya Hospital, transferred other specialist physicians and nurses to medical departments outside their area of expertise. The Ministry of Health replaced some of these department chiefs with doctors, reportedly Sunni, with far less training and experience. And although the current Minister of Health is Shia, most observers say his holding this office allows the Government to appear non-sectarian. According to the senior medical professionals PHR interviewed, the real power lies with the new Deputy Minister of Health, Dr. Aisha Mubarak Bu Unek, who is Sunni. She reportedly wears a Bahraini Defense Forces military uniform when present at Salmaniya Hospital.

Such politicization of healthcare only further shreds the fabric of a nation in political turmoil. Healthcare should remain beyond politics. Today in Bahrain, those who would heal the country’s wounded have become objects of persecution. Bahrain’s targeting of some of its leading medical professionals epitomizes a disturbing sectarian breach that must be addressed and mended. Dropping all politically motivated charges against each of the 48 medical workers is one way toward meaningful dialogue and reconciliation.

Policy Recommendations

To the Government of Bahrain:

- Drop all politically motivated charges against each of the 48 medical workers.
- Immediately allow open access to health care facilities for all those in need of medical care.
- Repeal the 2012 circular requiring medical professionals to report all patients suffering from injuries to Government authorities.
- Adhere to United Nations guidelines on the use of force.
- Ensure that police trainings on human rights and use of force are substantive and appropriate in scope.
- Establish accountability mechanisms for all those responsible for torture, excessive use of force, and other human rights violations.
- Ensure comprehensive training on the proper use of force and adherence to international law for all current members of security forces, as well as any new individuals seeking to join the forces.

To the United States Government:

- Withhold all military assistance to Bahrain until the Government of Bahrain makes measurable progress on human rights, including an end to the militarization of its public health system.
- Ensure that policy decisions regarding Bahrain support human rights protections and progress toward democracy.

To the International Community:

- Support the establishment of a UN Special Rapporteur on Medical Neutrality.



A Bahraini doctor attends an anti-government rally outside the United Nations office in the Bahraini capital Manama on December 14, 2011. Photo: Getty Images