

April 26, 2011

His Excellency Crown Prince Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa
Deputy Supreme Commander of the Bahrain Defence Force
Manama, Bahrain

Your Excellency:

We, the undersigned medical associations and health professionals, are deeply concerned about recent reports of violations of medical neutrality in Bahrain. We are especially alarmed by reports of arrests and disappearances of medical professionals who followed their ethical duty to provide treatment to sick and wounded pro-democracy demonstrators impartially and without interference.

In the past several weeks Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has documented deeply disturbing violations of well-established principles of medical neutrality. PHR's findings complement those of Human Rights Watch and indicate that Bahraini authorities have:

- Arrested and detained doctors and other medical professionals
- Punished physicians for adhering to ethical guidelines in administering medical care
- Attacked ambulances, including by removing ambulance medics and forcing them to give their uniforms to police who then posed as medics
- Prevented ambulances from reaching individuals who need medical care
- Blockaded health facilities
- Obstructed delivery of care
- Erased medical records
- Taken over civilian hospitals and medical centers
- Locked down hospitals (i.e. preventing or making it difficult for medics, nurses, doctors, other medical staff and patients to leave, while also preventing outsiders, including those who seek medical treatment, from entering)
- Reshuffled, forcibly discharged, segregated, targeted (i.e. searching hospitals and medical centers for patients wounded in protests), harassed, and detained (including incommunicado), patients
- Tortured, beat, abused, and humiliated patients
- Responded with excessive force against demonstrators causing unnecessary injury and suffering, including through use of tear gas, unidentified chemical agents, rubber bullets, and birdshot

Such attacks on medical professionals, health facilities, and patients are grave violations not only of medical neutrality but of well-founded customary international law. Furthermore, these acts violate Bahrain's responsibilities under key international human rights treaties, many of which codify the government's responsibility to provide access to health care.

Medical professionals and the facilities in which they operate provide essential services and receive heightened protections under international law. Amidst violence, medical professionals and institutions must remain firmly dedicated to their duty to provide medical care to those in need regardless of nationality, ethnicity, political affiliation, or other social division. This concept of medical neutrality is firmly grounded in international humanitarian law, professional codes and ethics, and international human rights law.

The government of Bahrain must respect its international legal obligations and cease all attacks on hospitals, patients, and medical professionals, and bring an end to all other violations of medical neutrality.

We call on Bahrain to release the arrested doctors and all others detained and disappeared for non-violent exercise of their fundamental rights and their ethical duties.

We appeal for an immediate cessation of interference with access to medical care for all sick and wounded patients in Bahrain.

We also urge your government to immediately allow an impartial body to investigate violations of medical neutrality and to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross unfettered access to all sick and injured.

We call on the government of Bahrain to hold all those responsible for violations of human rights and medical neutrality accountable under the law.

Sincerely,

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