

Bahrain: FREEDOM NOT DEATH FOR DEFENDER AL-KHAWAJA !

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A call from the international network

Secularism Is A Women's Issue (SIAWI)

To the authorities in Bahrain and to Member-States of the European Union

April 15, 2012

The network Secularism Is A Women's Issue demands the immediate release of human rights defender Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, detained and tortured, sentenced to life imprisonment in total disregard of his fundamental right to freedom of expression, on hunger strike for more than two months, and now risking death. His death in detention would be an assassination which the authorities of Bahrain would be entirely responsible for.

Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, aged 50, has dual citizenship from Denmark and Bahrain. Today, April 15, he has been on hunger strike for 65 days, as this is the only means left to him to protest the numerous violations of his rights since his arrest, in jail, in court and even in the military hospital where he was transferred on April 3 and where he is now detained.

His human rights defender record is impeccable: Persecuted for his opinion in Bahrain, he spent twelve years in Denmark, from March 1989 to June 2001, 'with (his) wife and four brave daughters', as he reminds the Danish Foreign Minister in an open letter dated February 14; this is where he was trained as a human rights defender and how he acquired Danish citizenship. He subsequently became the Director of the Bahrain Human Rights Organization (BHRO) based in Copenhagen. From 2002 to 2008, he was the Director of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, and from August 2008 to February 2011, he was the MENA regional field coordinator for Frontline, the international foundation for the protection of human rights defenders based in Dublin, Ireland.

As women, we give special consideration to the fact that Abdulhadi A-Khawaja is also a women's rights defender. Both his daughters, Zainab and Maryam, are activists in human rights organizations, both are presently persecuted by the authorities, one facing numerous arrests, the other now in exile. This testifies to the high standard of universal humanist values their father raised in them.

Back to Bahrain after a general amnesty, he is arrested on April 8, 2011. Following a crackdown on a wide popular protest, he is 'severely beaten, arbitrarily detained,

held in solitary confinement and subjected to torture for more than two months, brought before a military court on charges faked by the National Security Apparatus, and sentenced to life imprisonment'.

In this above mentioned letter to the Danish Minister, he also denounces previous other violations of his rights: 'detained in 2004, severely beaten during peaceful protests in 2005 and 2006, subjected to unfair trials, travel ban and continuous defamation campaigns in official and semi official media'.

The deterioration of the detained defender is as follows:

- Al-Khawaja was gravely tortured in detention. He was in very bad physical condition when he started his hunger strike, on February 8, 2012. Since then, he was surviving on one liter of salted water with glucose a day.
- From the 10th of March, in protest against bad treatment, he puts an end to all forms of cooperation: he refuses any check ups.
- On March 14, he has already lost 25% of his weight.
- On April 2, his lawyers request his 'release pending court decision'. The court of Cassation refuses. The court also refuses to include BICI's report (Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry) in the case records. Al-Khawaja then calls his family and lawyer and informs them of his decision to stop intake of glucose.
- He is hospitalised on April 3.
- On April 4, he is completely unable to move, he has very low blood pressure and blood sugar.
- Since April 7, we know that he can hardly breathe. He told his wife about mistreatment from military hospital staff and the guards. He asks to be transferred to another hospital and threatens to stop drinking water if there is no change. He declared: 'I will not accept this. I lived free and proud outside your prison and I live free and proud inside'.
- On April 12, he was informed by doctors that his condition was very critical and that he may go into a coma. Photos show a man in highly distressed physical condition. He was put on an IV that kept him conscious, but doctor said hospital IV drip 'would not be enough to keep him alive'.

However, neither his family nor his lawyer were given permission to visit him. His wife, Khadija Al-Mussawi, confirms that he was allowed to make a brief call to his family - may be his last one - to inform them of his likely going soon into a coma, in exchange that he will drink a little water.

National and international protests for his liberation were numerous:

- On February 23, Al-Khawaja calls on EU Member-states to stand up to their obligation to protect human rights defenders.
- On February 28, a sit-in is organized in Bahrain.
- On March 14, Bahrain starts a Twitter campaign.
- On April 8, thousands of protesters take to the streets in Bahrain to show support for the hunger striker.
- His daughter Zainab is arrested and detained while trying to see her father in hospital on April 8.
- On April 14, a human chain is organized in front of the office of the United Nations in Beirut, Lebanon, and demands his release.
- The UN Human Rights High Commissioner Bureau, Human Rights Watch, Frontline, Amnesty International, Human Rights First, the International Coalition of Women, Human Rights Defenders which gathers together numerous human rights and women's rights organizations, made pressing calls to the authorities in Bahrain.
- Civil society in Europe, Asia and Africa are now mobilizing.
- Meanwhile, Denmark officially demands Al-Khawaja's transfer to Denmark 'on humanitarian grounds': he would receive treatment not just for the effects of his hunger strike, but also for the consequences of tortures he was subjected to in detention. Denmark Ambassador in Bahrain was not allowed to visit him on April 8 and 9.
- Denmark Ambassador in Saudi Arabia, Christian Köningfeldt visited him for about twenty minutes on April 10; he confirms that Al-Khawaja was still conscious. On April 10, Denmark Prime Minister, Helle Thorning Schmidt confirmed during a press conference that: 'Denmark demands that Danish-Bahraini citizen and human rights activist Khawaja be freed'. On April 9, the Head of Foreign Ministry's consular services, Ole Engberg Mikkelsen, confirmed that no official response was given yet: 'Unfortunately, there is not much time. It is a case where the clock is ticking', he declared.

It is now most likely that Al-Khawaja will die in the coming days unless the authorities of Bahrain accept his being transferred to Denmark.

Yes, but we have to talk about this also in coordination meeting.

I want to support but as feminist network if we begin to support humanitarian causes, we cannot be selective. We have to support them all.

The international network *Secularism Is A Women's Issue* vigorously denounces this foreseeable murder and protests the fact that neither the UN Council of Human Rights nor EU member-states manage to obtain Al-Khawaja's liberation at the earliest, as is their obligation under the 'Guidelines for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders' they adopted. Al-Khawaja in his open letter to the Danish Foreign Minister stated: 'As a human rights defender, regardless of being a Danish citizen, I am entitled for protection by EU member-states in accordance with the EU Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders around the world'.

Secularism Is A Women's Issue insists on reminding the authorities in Bahrain that international laws, as well as universal humanist values and the religious principle of respect for human life which Bahrain adheres to, all concur and agree on this issue.

Al-Khawaja must receive treatment, keeping him in detention is a disguised death sentence.

Secularism Is A Women's Issue calls for a mass media campaign through the mobilization of civil society organizations in the EU member-states in order to force the states to fulfill their obligations of defending those who defend rights.

Secularism Is A Women's Issue also calls on the powerful women's organizations and networks in Muslim countries for a wide mobilization across continents.

Together, let's snatch Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja's life from the hands of its persecutors.

Before it is too late!