

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (TLHRC)
Hearing on Human Rights in Bahrain
Friday, May 13, 2011**



Testimony from Richard Sollom, MPH, Deputy Director, Physicians for Human Rights



*Photo credit Tom Lantos
Human Rights Commission*

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

Mr. Chairman, in the interest of time, I'd like to summarize my remarks and ask that my full statement be made part of the record. In addition, I'd like to submit for the record our full report as well as a list of Bahraini doctors, whose whereabouts remain unknown in the wake of the government crackdown against medical personnel.

In previous statements, we heard that thousands of protesters took to the streets in Bahrain calling for government reform earlier this year. The government's response was brutal and systematic: shoot civilian protesters, detain and torture them, and erase all evidence. On the frontline, treating hundreds of these wounded civilians, doctors had firsthand knowledge of these abuses.

The assault on healthcare workers and their patients violates the principle of medical neutrality as well as international law.

As part of a Physicians for Human Rights investigation in Bahrain in April of this year, my colleague, Dr. Nizam Peerwani and I conducted in-depth interviews with 47 medical workers, patients, and other eyewitnesses to human rights violations. We corroborated these testimonies by conducting physical examinations of beaten and tortured protesters. In addition, we examined their medical records and X-rays, and also investigated 4 suspicious deaths in custody.

Our investigation produced strong evidence that the Government of Bahrain has systematically targeted medical personnel as a result of their efforts to provide ethical and unbiased care for wounded protesters. These systematic attacks include abductions of physicians, some of whom were taken from their homes in the middle of the night, handcuffed and blindfolded, by masked security forces. For each doctor, nurse, or medic that the government disappears, many more civilians' lives are impacted as patients go untreated.

In conflict situations around the world, there is a unique and highly qualified community of professionals who bring comfort and compassion to those in need. Medical workers in all countries are bound by their professional ethics to provide care without consideration of religion, ethnicity, or other status. Because doctors are trained to apply their skills without discrimination, they glean first-hand knowledge of types of injury and numbers of deaths during a conflict. And importantly, they can discern the cause of injury and death. That expertise and knowledge make doctors important witnesses to government abuses and, in the case of Bahrain, make them targets themselves.

During our investigation, we gathered evidence about these and other egregious abuses against patients and detainees including torture, beating, humiliation, and threats of rape and killing. Our documentation and forensic evidence enable us to conclude the following:

1. Government authorities used excessive force, including high-velocity weapons and shotguns – often fired at a close range aiming at the face and head of protesters.
2. Security forces used unidentified chemical agents, which cause disorientation, aphasia, and convulsions.

3. Perhaps most alarming during my investigation was listening to several patients describe similar accounts of being tortured by security forces on the 6th floor of Salmaniya Hospital – supposedly a refuge for the sick and injured.

Regarding issues of medical neutrality, I gathered corroborated evidence that Bahraini authorities:

1. physically attacked 6 physicians who were on-call the night of April 3rd at Salmaniya Hospital
2. used ambulances for military purposes and stole uniforms to pose as medics apparently to get closer to the protesters; and
3. militarized hospitals and clinics, which continue to obstruct patients from seeking urgent medical care.

The assault on healthcare workers and their patients constitutes extreme violations of the principle of *medical neutrality* and are grave breaches of international law.

In conclusion, I propose the following actions on the part of the US government:

1. The Administration’s “mild” approach toward Bahrain as characterized in a May 9th Washington Post Editorial has failed to curb government abuses, and doctors are still being disappeared. Senior members of the Administration, including the President, should instead speak out publicly – and in no uncertain terms – against ongoing human rights abuses by government authorities. The Administration should also demand the immediate and unconditional release of all detained medical personnel.
2. Members of Congress and the Administration should visit Salmaniya Hospital and meet with representatives of the medical community in Bahrain.
3. The United States should spearhead an international effort to create a new mandate for a Special Rapporteur on Violations of Medical Neutrality through the United Nations Human Rights Council.
4. PHR would like to thank Representative McDermott for his leadership on issues of medical neutrality and for introducing a bill dedicated to protecting and promoting medical neutrality through US foreign policy. We encourage all Members to support passage of this bill, which would:
 - a. Suspend non-humanitarian foreign assistance to countries violating medical neutrality
 - b. Support a UN mandate for a Special Rapporteur on violations of medical neutrality; and
 - c. Add the reporting of violations of medical neutrality to the annual State Department human rights country reports.

I am confident that through these efforts, the US government can become an international leader in the protection and promotion of medical neutrality. I thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today, and I am ready to answer any questions you may have.