

Detained Bahraini Medics: Brutal Crackdown against Pro-Democracy Movement

Royal College of Surgeons Ireland: Putting Money Before Human Rights

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Prestigious college slammed for silence over detained Bahraini medics

The families of medics unlawfully detained in Bahrain have accused the Royal College of Surgeons Ireland (RCSI) of putting financial investment interests above human rights after the college refused to make a public statement concerning the fate of Bahraini members held incommunicado by the regime.

The ongoing brutal crackdown by the Bahraini state against the pro-democracy movement, which began on March 16 after the Saudi-led military forces entered the country, has resulted in more than 30 civilian deaths and nearly 1,000 persons held in secret detention centres. Among the detainees are more than 30 medical staff, including senior doctors, nurses and paramedics whom the US-backed Sunni rulers accuse of supporting anti-government protesters.

Several of the missing medics are members of the RCSI, having conducted their training in Dublin, Ireland. They include senior consultants Ghassan Dhaif, Baser Dhaif and Ali Al Ekri. The latter was arrested on March 17 while performing surgery at Salmaniya Medical Complex, the country's largest public hospital, when Saudi-led forces commandeered the facility. Colleagues were assaulted and threatened as Dr Al Ekri was forcibly taken into custody. His whereabouts and that of the other medics remain unknown, with legal representation being denied to them. Dr Al Ekri, who trained in Dublin between 2000 and 2002, is an internationally respected surgeon who was awarded a medal of honour in 2009 for life-saving work on Palestinian victims of Israel's murderous onslaught in Gaza.

Two weeks after the Saudi-led repression in Bahrain, the RCSI sent a fact-finding team from Ireland, led by Professor Cathal Kelly, to the Persian Gulf island state. It is understood the college's team spent five days in Bahrain appraising claims of violations against medical personnel. The college has a long-standing association with the oil-rich kingdom, dating over 30 years, for training Bahraini medical staff. In recent years, the RCSI has embarked on an ambitious expansion plan in Bahrain opening a medical university in early 2009 and investing over €100 million (\$145m) in other major ongoing developments.

However, the RCSI has pointedly declined to issue a report on its fact-finding mission to Bahrain or a statement concerning the illegal detention of its members. Asked about concern for the safety and well-being of its members, including Dr Al Ekri, the college's head of communications in Dublin said: "The Royal College of Surgeons Ireland is making no further public statement on the matter."

The RCSI's refusal to make a statement is in contrast to several international bodies, such as the United Nations Human Rights Committee, Human Rights Watch, Doctors Without Borders and the US-based Physicians for Human Rights, which have condemned the Bahraini government for its maltreatment of medics in the wake of the ruthless repression against the mainly Shia-led pro-democracy movement.

As part of the state of emergency declared by Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa on March 14, all public hospitals and medical centres have been taken over by military forces, which resulted in medics and hundreds of injured patients suspected of involvement in anti-government protests being detained.

The whereabouts of the missing medics and patients remain unknown and there are deep concerns for their safety. The Bahrain Centre for Human Rights says that detainees held by the state are "routinely subjected to torture". In the last week, four detainees have died while in custody, their bodies showing signs of severe maltreatment.

During its five-day mission to Bahrain, families of the missing medics said that they were not contacted by the RSCI fact-finding team. A statement by relatives said: "We are bitterly disappointed that the RSCI team did not make contact with the families of the doctors who have been detained. We are also disappointed that the college has not made a public statement protesting the unlawful treatment of its members by the Bahraini state. These doctors did nothing wrong except treat people who were badly injured by Bahraini state forces. The lack of support from the RSCI to the families of these doctors is only adding to our anguish and despair."

Furthermore, relatives of the detained medics said they believe that the RCSI's substantial financial investments in the state of Bahrain is the reason why the college is not speaking out on their behalf.

In its annual report for 2010, the RCSI highlights the importance of Bahrain as an overseas investment destination for the college.

College president Frank Keane said: "Bahrain has, for a number of years, consumed a great deal of our overseas energies. The [newly opened] Medical School is continuing to make strides, culminating in our first graduation class this summer. This will mark a significant milestone at many levels, consolidating the school itself as well as its regional credibility and status." [1]

The RCSI president went on to reveal how ongoing investments in Bahrain are dependent on maintaining good relations with the rulers for realizing several major projects.

"We have for a long time been on the cusp of closing the deal for the development of the Health Oasis on the land donated to us by the King. At the same time, the management contract for the King Hamad Teaching Hospital has proved equally elusive and frustrating to try and reach closure. One of the goals has been to bring these matters to an early conclusion, which must happen soon."

The RCSI's \$65 million Medical School in Bahrain opened in February 2009 with Ireland's President Mary McAleese and the Bahraini Prime Minister Prince Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa in attendance.

In January 2010, the RSCI signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Arab

Administrative Development Organisation, with the aim of setting up similar medical projects in other Middle East countries, including the Emirate of Dubai. In this regard, the success of its projects in Bahrain is an important platform for the RCSI's expansion plans across the Middle East and beyond.

The 200-year-old prestigious college, which claims humanitarian concerns to be one of its founding tenets, said in its annual report: "The RCSI continues to explore philanthropic and entrepreneurial opportunities across the globe."

Evidently from the RCSI's lack of response over its unlawfully detained members in Bahrain, the college's over-riding emphasis would seem to be on entrepreneurial opportunities.

NOTES:

[1] http://www.rcsi.ie/files/about-us/20101026022542_AnnualRpt0910.pdf

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Finian Cunningham has written extensively on international affairs, with articles published in several languages. Many of his recent articles appear on the renowned Canadian-based news website Globalresearch.ca. He is a Master's graduate in Agricultural Chemistry and worked as a scientific editor for the Royal Society of Chemistry, Cambridge, England, before pursuing a career in journalism. He specialises in Middle East and East Africa issues and has also given several American radio interviews as well as TV interviews on Press TV and Russia Today. Previously, he was based in Bahrain and witnessed the political upheavals in the Persian Gulf kingdom during 2011 as well as the subsequent Saudi-led brutal crackdown against pro-democracy protests.

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