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Six American activists arrested in, deported from Bahrain

by Claire Schaeffer-Duffy

Bahraini authorities arrested and deported six Americans on Tuesday who say they were in the country as part of a monitoring mission during a security crackdown on the first anniversary of the country's popular uprising.

The Americans activists are members of Witness Bahrain, a newly created U.S. group of civilian observers. All six were arrested in the capital of Manama while accompanying human rights activist Nabeel Rajab during a protest march toward the Pearl Roundabout, the epicenter of last year's anti-government protests that were crushed weeks after they began.

In addition to the six Americans, police arrested dozens of protestors, including women and children, according to Al Wefaq, the country's main political opposition party, which is aligned with Shi'a Islam. Also detained were several human rights activists, among them Rajab, who was later released.

According to Medea Benjamin, a human rights activist and member of Witness Bahrain, thousands of demonstrators attempted to march to the Pearl Roundabout the day before but were turned back by "overwhelming doses of tear gas, birdshot, rubber bullets and concussion grenades."

On Tuesday morning, Benjamin wrote on the Code Pink website, "It was clear the government was going to try and stop all protests. It was like a state of siege. The police had set up check points and road blocks everywhere."

That afternoon, demonstrators attempted to drive to the roundabout, causing a traffic jam, Benjamin writes. Referring to King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, the country's Sunni leader, drivers were honking their horns to the rhythm of "Down! Down! King Hamad," Benjamin says.

When Rajab got out of his car and started to walk toward the roundabout, the American monitors attempted to follow him, but retreated into nearby vehicles after police fired canisters of tear gas directly at them, Benjamin writes.

"Two of us, Flo and Kate were arrested almost immediately," she said. "The other seven, finding ourselves in different cars, tried to regroup. Unfortunately when four members of the group got back together and started walking down the street, they too, were nabbed by the police. At first, it seemed they were going to just check their documents, but after hours of waiting, the government decided to deport them all."

Bahrain, which is base of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, was the only Gulf state to experience a popular uprising during last year's Arab Spring movement. Shi'ites account for about 70 percent of the country's 525,000 citizens, but say they have faced decades of discrimination and are blocked from top political and security posts. The country's Sunni ruling family has been in power for more than 200 years.

After reports that it had brutally repressed last year's protests, the Bahraini government promised to implement reforms, but people opposing the government say it has delivered too little too late. Some of protestors' demands include limiting the monarchy's ability to appoint cabinet ministers and members of parliament and releasing the many political prisoners detained in last year's demonstrations.

Over the past several months, Bahrain has expelled or denied entry to several human rights groups and many foreign news organizations, including *The New York Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *The Wall Street Journal* and Al Jazeera. The country ranks 173 out of 179 on Reporters Without Borders' latest press freedom index.

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Many activists have expressed fears the government is excluding foreign observers to avoid international scrutiny of its crackdown on the mass protests that have become larger and angrier in the last several weeks.

At a press briefing Wednesday, U.S. Department of State spokesperson Victoria Nuland was asked about security forces preventing protestors from marching Tuesday. Nuland said she had "seen conflicting reports about who was at fault there."

"Anybody who wants to demonstrate peacefully should be allowed to demonstrate peacefully -- emphasis on the word 'peacefully,'" she said, adding the U.S. "holds the government of Bahrain responsible for the performance of its security forces."

Last weekend, Bahraini authorities arrested and deported two members of Witness Bahrain, American lawyers Huwaida Arraf and Radhika Sainath. In a Monday interview with Al Jazeera, Sainath said she and Arraf were arrested while monitoring "a nonviolent democracy protest in downtown Manama." Sainath described her treatment by police as "appalling" but "nowhere close to what I would have faced if I were Bahraini."

On the Witness Bahrain website, Sainath outlined her reason for going to Bahrain:

"A doctor who I only knew by the name of A explained how security forces would attack Shia villages with teargas and birdshot on a daily basis, break into houses at night and toss tear gas

canisters into tightly packed homes, arresting anyone suspected of involvement in the democracy movement. Would we come and stay in these villages? Surely the government would behave differently if Americans and Europeans were watching."

Bahrain's state news agency said the six Americans arrested Tuesday participated in "illegal demonstrations" and were being deported "for applying for tourists visas under false pretenses." An immigration official told the news agency, "People coming to visit Bahrain need to understand that lying to on immigration documents is against the law and they will face the consequences of their action."

After being held at the Hooraa police station for questioning, five of the Americans were deported to London. One, scheduled to leave Bahrain on Wednesday, returned to the United States on her original ticket.

The six Americans arrested are:

- Kate Rafael, a radio journalist and blogger from Oakland, Calif.;
- Flo Razowsky, a photographer and community organizer living in Minneapolis;
- Linda Sartor, a teacher and community activist living in Northern California;
- Paki Wieland, a retired social worker and family therapist educator from western Massachusetts;
- Mike Loperchio, a restaurant owner from Arizona;
- Brian Terrell, a member of the Strangers and Guests Catholic Worker community in Maloy, Iowa.

[Claire Schaeffer-Duffy is a longtime *NCR* contributor. She writes from Worcester, Mass., where she lives and works at the Ss. Francis and Therese Catholic Worker.]

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