

The Arab Team for Trial Monitoring

A brief report on the team's visit of the state of Qatar (23rd till 25th of February 2013)

In aspiration of creating a more effective and efficient movement for fair trials a diverse team of Human Rights defenders was assembled (from Egypt, Yemen, Lebanon, and Jordan) to represent various Arab Human Rights Organisations. The objective of forming the team is to generate a more vibrant Human Rights reality in the region via ensuring greater access to fair trials (through evaluating the obstacles and opportunities for reform). The team was founded on the belief that networking and partnerships, on the national and regional levels, would be able to create an encouraging environment for reform.

The team visited the state of Qatar in its first monitoring mission, in inauguration of the Team's strategy for the Arab Gulf States. The team received enthusiastic welcome and cooperation from the State of Qatar which we hope to see in our following visits to other Arab States.

The visiting team included representatives from:

The Arab Organisation for Human Rights

The Regional Network for Human Rights in the Gulf States and Yemen

Human Rights Information and training centre

Aladala Centre for Human Rights (Jordan)

Kernel foundation for Development and Awareness (Egypt)

The Arab Network for human Rights Information

The Beirut Centre for Development and Human rights

The programme for the visit included intensive discussions with officials, investigative meetings, and meetings with regional human rights activists. This included the following activities:

1) Meeting with the National Human Rights Committee (in Qatar):

The team met with Mr "Ali Ben Smaikh Al-Marry" the committee head and the team from the committee that had facilitated arranging official visits and meetings with regional activists who had participated in the first Human Rights Forum for the Gulf States and Yemen (the forum had been organised by the committee in cooperation with Human Rights Information and training centre).

The meeting covered the Human Rights situation in Qatar, the role of the committee and other national Human Rights bodies, the role of independent human rights groups and civil society in Qatar, as well as the role of the legal and judicial system in preserving the right to fair trials.

The committee expressed its enthusiasm for the visit and for the coordination of efforts with Arab nongovernmental Human Rights groups. The committee expressed their aspiration for increased cooperation with the team and their will to continuous support of the team's activities. Furthermore, the committee has pledged to aid the efforts of nongovernmental organisations in the region, specifically in the areas of raising awareness about Human Rights and inter-organisation coordination and partnerships.

2) Meeting with the Minister for Interior in Qatar

The team was met by his Excellency the Minister for Interior Sheikh "Abdullah bn Nasser Bn Khalifa the second" at his office. Several important subjects were broached including:

The reality of the Human Rights movement in Qatar

Workers rights (especially expatriate workers)

Prison and detention centre conditions

Other relevant and related cases

The minister extended a warm welcome to the team and assured the team that the state of Qatar is keen on working with Arab civil society organisations in the field of Human Rights. The minister also pledged his willingness to increase cooperation with those organisations especially with regards to raising awareness, the creation of new endeavours and follow up on the ground.

With regards to international Human Rights standards for expatriate labour, the Minister assured the team that the state of Qatar and the ministry of Interior were committed to maintaining expatriate rights at international standards. Moreover assurances were given that the Ministry and the state were working towards developing the work laws, with the aim of preserving the rights of both the sponsor and the expat. The team in turn declared readiness to support these important efforts.

The Minister welcomed the team's request to visit Qatar's detention centres and the central prison. The minister was also careful to take note of the results and recommendations of those visits; in order to improve mechanisms that guarantee Human Rights.

3) Meeting with the Attorney General

The team met with the attorney general Dr. "Ali Bin Mohsen Bin Fetais Al Marri" in his office. The meeting produced a discussion on the importance of this initiative and the role of public prosecution and the judiciary in protecting and upholding Human Rights.

The attorney general expressed his enthusiasm at working with civil society, as well as his appreciation for the role of civil society and NGOs play in maintaining justice and the rule of law.

The general outcome of this meeting was a general consensus on the importance of the role of NGOs and community partnerships in the field of human rights; embodied in training, awareness campaigns, inspections and assessment. The Attorney General made a number of assurances regarding the prosecution's mechanisms of dealing with certain cases and the prosecutions commitment to raising standards. Furthermore, the Attorney general welcomed the idea of a follow-up visit in the near future.

4) Inspection of the Qatar Central Prison

The team paid a visit to Qatar's central prison in order to access the standards of treatment. The team was satisfied with the system and procedures in place, but the team believed that maintaining and improving these standards requires constant training.

During the visit the team interviewed the incarcerated poet "Mohammed al-Ajam" (also known as Mohamed Ibn El Dheeb) for 80 minutes. The poet was asked about what kind of treatment he had received since his incarceration in the central prison.

Mr. Ajam stated that the problems he encountered at the beginning of his imprisonment had been solved; he was now able to meet his family and legal representation on a weekly basis, he is also allowed to exercise one hour per day. Furthermore, the prison now provides television, newspapers (other than the ones brought to him by his legal representation), the tools necessary for him to continue writing, and a room to separate the washroom from the detention area.

Mr. Al-Ajam asked the team to aid him in convincing Prison authorities in letting him contact his family on occasion by phone and, on the recommendation of the team, allow a Human Rights representative from the National Human Rights Committee to visit him weekly.

With regards to the trial, Mr Al-Ajam stated that ions on the court proceedings that led to his receiving a life sentence, however, he said that he was more comfortable with the procedure in the appeals court that has allowed his legal representation to make a case and state his demands.

The poet explained the reasons for his incarceration to the team by alleging that one of his poems had been misunderstood. His poem was seen as insulting to the royal family and as a call to overthrow the regime, which he denied stating his respect for the royal family.

5) Attending the sentencing of the Poet "Mohamed Al-Ajam (Ibn El Dheeb)"

On the 23rd of February 2013 some members of the team attended the sentencing of the Poet, in the appeals court. The poet had been charged with threatening to overthrow the regime and insulting the crown prince.

The appeals court ruled against Mr. Al-Ajam and sentenced him to 15 years imprisonment. After the sentencing, the group attending met with Dr. Najib Al-Naemi (Mr Al-Ajam's lawyer) in order to listen to his views on the case and the sentence.

The team maintains their utmost respect for the independence of the Qatari Judiciary and its role in upholding justice. Nevertheless, the team intends to request that Qatar officials to follow up on the proceedings in the coming stage.

The team also renews their appeal to the Crown Prince to pardon the poet "Mohamed Al-Ajam" at the earliest possible time.

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The team expresses it's thanks to the State of Qatar for its cooperation, and hopes that this visit will be a first step in the promotion of Human rights in the region and inter-Arab cooperation in this field to fulfil our common goals.