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ARTICLE 19

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Bahrain: ARTICLE 19 calls for the ban on women's rights activist Ghada Jamsheer to be lifted

ARTICLE 19 has written to King Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa demanding the end of the media 'black out' of women's rights activist Ghada Jamsheer. In early October Ms Jamsheer revealed the existence of a formal decision preventing her from appearing in any of the Bahraini media, both printed and broadcast.

Dr. Agnes Callamard, Executive Director of ARTICLE 19, said: *"The ban imposed on Ms Jamsheer is a clear violation of her right to freedom of expression, and of freedom of the press in Bahrain. It undermines much needed debates in Bahraini society and the ongoing realisation of a range of human rights. In particular, this ban will silence women's voices and discourage their participation in civil society."*

ARTICLE 19 is deeply concerned that the ban is in direct conflict with the King's commitment to reform, as evidenced by his introduction of the National Action Charter in 2001 that was endorsed by the people of Bahrain. The ban also violates Bahrain's international obligations, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which it acceded in September 2006. Under Article 19 of the ICCPR, Bahrain has to respect the right of its citizens to freedom of expression. ARTICLE 19 urges the King to use his authority to restore freedom of expression, including freedom of the press, by lifting the ban on media coverage of Ms Jamsheer.

Background:

According to Aafaq, a news website, press sources in Bahrain have confirmed that the ban came directly from Khalid bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa, Minister of the Royal Court. The ban prevents the publication of any article or news relating to Ms Jamsheer.¹ Ms Jamsheer has also spoken publicly to Aafaq about the ban.

Ghada Jamsheer is a women's right activist and the President of the Women's Petition Committee (WPC), and she has long been harassed by the authorities in Bahrain for her activities to promote women's rights. The WPC is a network of Bahraini human rights defenders that campaigns for the codification of Bahrain's family law and the reform of Shari'a Family Courts.

The ban came as a result of Jamsheer's letter sent in April to the King Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, which criticised the role and inaction of the Supreme Council for

¹ http://www.aafaq.org/reports.aspx?id_rep=129.

Women (SCW) and pointed out the SCW's failure to promote women's rights. The SCW is chaired by the King's wife Sheikha Sabika Bint Ibrahim Al-Khalifa.

In her letter, Jamsheer also drew attention to the fact that many of the women appointed to the SCW and other positions were granted these positions according to political loyalties or family relations. Jamsheer called for the dissolution of the SCW and for giving the opportunity to independent women's rights organisations, committees and women rights activists to play their role in promoting women's rights.

Ms Jamsheer informed ARTICLE 19 that since the end of April, the media in Bahrain has not published any of her articles or WPC news items. She stressed that the ban was ordered by the minister of the Royal Court in an attempt to silence her and hinder her work to promote women's right.

In 2005 Ghada Jamsheer faced 3 criminal charges for allegedly criticising family judges. These charges were later discontinued. Since 2006 she has been placed under surveillance, with her daily movements and activities monitored by public security officials.

The ban imposed on Ghada Jamsheer is taking place in a political climate where the rights to freedom of expression are under attack. At least 22 local and international websites have been blocked by the Bahrain Ministry of Information² including the website of the Arabic Network for Human Right Information and the Bahrain Center for Human Rights. The latest website to be targeted is the HAQ Movement of Liberties and Democratic Bahrain, while the website of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information was censored earlier this year.³

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.

² Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), Manama, 15/10/2007, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/internetblocks>

³ Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), Manama, 15/10/2007, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/node/1480>