



# Economic and Social Council

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## Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Seventy-first session

### Summary record of the 20th meeting

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Friday, 25 February 2022, at 3 p.m.

*Chair:* Mr. Abdel-Moneim

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### Consideration of reports (*continued*)

- (a) Reports submitted by States parties in accordance with articles 16 and 17 of the Covenant (*continued*)

*Initial report of Bahrain (continued)*

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*The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.*

**Consideration of reports** *(continued)*

**(a) Reports submitted by States parties in accordance with articles 16 and 17 of the Covenant** *(continued)*

*Initial report of Bahrain (continued)* (E/C.12/BHR/1)

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Bahrain joined the meeting.*
2. **The Chair** invited the delegation to continue replying to the questions raised by Committee members at the previous meeting with the State party.
3. **Ms. Janahi** (Bahrain), speaking via video link, said that Bahrain had a special home that provided shelter and care for children of unknown parents and children from broken homes. The Supreme Council for Women ran awareness-raising programmes on family law as well as training sessions for persons preparing for marriage on the rights and duties of spouses.
4. **Ms. Al-Mannai** (Bahrain), speaking via video link, said that social security for citizens was guaranteed under the Constitution. For citizens who did not have sufficient income of their own, that took the form of monetary support to meet their basic needs, in which regard over 21 million Bahraini dinars (BD) had been disbursed to more than 16,000 families and individuals in 2021. Even after they no longer required social security payments, families with limited income continued to receive support, including subsidized water and electricity bills and additional assistance during the month of Ramadan. Some 12,700 persons with disabilities had received cash allowances totalling BD 26 million in 2021.
5. As of January 2022, the amounts paid out in social assistance and financial support had been raised by 10 per cent to reflect an increase in value added tax. Around 171,800 heads of household had received support under the “redirecting meat subsidies” scheme in 2021, for a total amount of BD 29 million. With the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the Government had allocated around BD 4.5 billion to bolster the economy, protect public sector workers and ensure the continuance of social assistance payments.
6. **Ms. El-Sayed** (Bahrain), speaking via video link, said that a team from the Ministry of Labour and Social Development was responsible for overseeing and inspecting all 64 rehabilitation centres for persons with disabilities in Bahrain. The team had judicial authority and any reports of violence it received were referred immediately to the competent bodies. The Ministry also ran a website where persons with disabilities could file complaints and make proposals. Act No. 74 of 2006 concerning the welfare, habilitation and employment of persons with disabilities had been amended in 2017 to cover children with disabilities of Bahraini mothers and foreign fathers who were permanently resident in Bahrain.
7. **Mr. Hennebel** (Country Rapporteur) said that he wished the delegation to provide more specific information about cases currently being investigated by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, and specifically about the state of health of Abduljalil al-Singace, Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja and Naji Ali Fateel. The Committee was concerned by reports that refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons who suffered from HIV/AIDS were not entitled to health care in Bahrain, meaning that they were obliged to seek treatment outside the country. Moreover, since the renewal of residency permits apparently required an HIV/AIDS test, such persons were also at risk of expulsion, which would amount to a violation of the principle of non-refoulement. Lastly he wished to know what steps had been taken to tackle overcrowding in prisons, which constituted a grave risk to inmates’ health.
8. **Mr. Bucheeri** (Bahrain), speaking via video link, said that Bahrain had replied in detail to all the communications it had received from special procedures mandate holders concerning the situation of human rights defenders, including the cases mentioned by Mr. Hennebel.

9. **Mr. Abdulla Abdulrahman Al Khalifa** (Bahrain), speaking via video link, said that no charges had been levelled against human rights defenders who, in fact, enjoyed protection under domestic legislation, which regulated their activities and provided that all persons were free to express their views on condition that they did so within the framework of the law and did not violate the rights of others. Victims of violations or ill-treatment could avail themselves of domestic remedies by appealing to independent national institutions such as the Special Investigation Unit of the Public Prosecution Service. Those institutions had garnered praise from a number of States and international organizations as well as from the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Bahrain.

10. **Mr. Matar** (Bahrain), speaking via video link, said that there was no overcrowding in correctional centres in Bahrain. Inmates were able to access health services on an equal footing with the rest of the population and without discrimination. Health care was delivered inside prison facilities although, in urgent and life-threatening cases, inmates could be transferred to hospital for treatment or released, depending upon the circumstances and the gravity of the case. Around 16,000 medical examinations had been conducted in the country's prisons in the course of 2021. A number of bodies – including the Special Investigation Unit, the National Institution for Human Rights, the Office of the Ombudsman and the Prisoners and Detainees Rights Commission – were mandated to make visits, both regular and unannounced, to places of deprivation of liberty.

11. The measures Bahrain had taken to contain and combat the COVID-19 pandemic in places of detention and to prevent the spread of the virus among staff and inmates had been recognized as among the best in the Middle East. Infected persons had been kept in isolation while special facilities had been set aside for contact cases. All inmates who had requested the COVID-19 vaccine had received it. Currently 98 per cent of the prison population had been given both the first and second dose as well as the booster dose.

12. **Ms. Habib** (Bahrain), speaking via video link, said that the Office of the Ombudsman, an independent body created in 2013, investigated any alleged violation committed by civilian or military officials of the Ministry of the Interior in the course of their duties. The fact that the Office had received more than 7,000 complaints and requests for assistance in eight years, and that 20 per cent of applicants had had recourse to the institution on more than one occasion, was a testament to the public's confidence in the Ombudsman. Many of the recommendations made by the Office of the Ombudsman and by the Prisoners and Detainees Rights Commission following prison visits had been accepted and implemented by the Ministry of the Interior.

13. **Mr. Almana** (Bahrain), speaking via video link, said that domestic law envisaged restrictions under which persons suffering from an infectious disease such as tuberculosis or HIV/AIDS were not permitted to enter Bahrain. The purpose of such restrictions was to protect the community and safeguard public health. Nonetheless, persons suffering from infectious diseases who already had a residency permit and who had legitimate interests in Bahrain could be allowed to enter, subject to the approval of a committee. Once inside the country, they would receive health care on an equal footing with the rest of the population including, in some cases, exemption from medical fees. Care for persons with HIV/AIDS was dispensed in accordance with the law and was consistent with international standards.

14. The same COVID-19 protocols were applied to persons deprived of liberty – both pretrial detainees and convicted prisoners, Bahrainis and non-Bahrainis – as to the rest of the population. That included testing, diagnosis, follow-up, isolation, quarantine, treatment, including monoclonal antibody treatment, and, in case of need, intensive care.

15. **Ms. Al-Amer** (Bahrain), speaking via video link, said that, in accordance with the Constitution and the Education Act, there was no discrimination in education based on origin, race, language or sex. In the public education system, all subjects on the curriculum were taught equally, including religious education, which covered both the Jaafari and the Sunni schools of Islam. Students who wished to specialize could attend a Jaafari or a Sunni Islamic institute, which provided education at all levels and offered the same services as public schools. More than 700 students were enrolled in such institutes. To further promote freedom of religion, non-Muslim students were exempted from Islamic education in public and private schools. A total of 18 students belonging to other religions were enrolled in public schools.

16. Education was a principle of Islam, and the right to education was guaranteed to all Bahraini citizens and residents. Education was considered essential to ensuring good citizenship and the prosperity of the country. The educational curricula promoted a sense of belonging to the country, loyalty to the King and respect for human rights. Children also learned about peace and international solidarity on the basis of justice, equality and mutual cooperation among all States and peoples.

17. The Ministry of Education paid particular attention to ensuring the right to education of children with disabilities and special needs, who were provided with educational opportunities in accordance with their individual needs and either partially or fully included in mainstream public schools and classes depending on their individual capacity. The Ministry provided children with disabilities with the necessary facilities, assistive devices and special classes so that they could study with their peers without discrimination. The inclusion of children with disabilities in private schools was also encouraged.

18. There were 85 children with physical disabilities, 125 with hearing impairments, 76 with visual impairments, 62 with intellectual disabilities and 171 with other disabilities enrolled in public schools. In 2019, there had been 17 students with motor and visual disabilities studying at the University of Bahrain. Updated statistics on student numbers would be provided in writing. In 2019/20, a total of 82 public schools had been capable of including children with disabilities in mainstream classes, and that number was steadily increasing. Classes that included children with disabilities were assigned one teacher and one teaching assistant. Teachers received specialized ongoing training on catering for students with disabilities. There were also teachers qualified in sign language, which had recently been introduced as an optional subject in public schools. A range of adaptations were provided in schools for children with physical, sensory or intellectual disabilities: specialized computers, Braille equipment and other devices for persons with functional impairments, specially equipped toilets and special bus services. Students with disabilities were eligible for scholarships to study abroad. The Ministry also provided support for specialized institutes for children with disabilities, such as the Saudi-Bahraini Institute for the Blind.

19. Boys and girls who excelled at school or had special talents, including having memorized the Qur'an, were also eligible for scholarships to study abroad in various fields in line with the future needs of the Bahraini labour market. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, it had still been possible to send some students to study abroad.

20. The Ministry of Education had adopted various preventive measures during the pandemic in line with the decisions taken by the national COVID-19 task force and the Ministry of Health. Under the policy on teleworking, between 30 and 70 per cent of civil servants had been allowed to work from home. Women with primary school-aged children had been given priority, along with persons with chronic illnesses. A guide setting out a full range of preventive measures to be adopted at all stages of the school day had been published for public and private crèches, schools and universities to protect the health and safety of students, teachers and staff, without discrimination. For example, classrooms had been disinfected and hand sanitizer made available. Such preventive measures remained in place.

21. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Ministry of Education had ensured the continuity of education without interruption. The transition to distance learning had been successful, as modern technology and online teaching methods had already been introduced under the Schools of the Future project in 2005. Even before the pandemic, teachers had been provided with professional training in that area. Since the 2020/21 school year, a hybrid education model had been in place. Parents could choose whether to send their children to school or to pursue distance learning. A dedicated online education portal set up for distance education had received 33 million visits; 14 YouTube channels and resources for children with disabilities were also available. For children who did not have access to their own computer, lessons were broadcast on television.

22. Even before the pandemic, the Ministry had ensured to right to education for pupils unable to go to school because of illness, for example. Free textbooks were distributed to such students and all students in public schools. Free textbooks for core subjects were also distributed in private schools. The various ministries cooperated to ensure that educational resources were also available in electronic format. Some 10,000 computers had been

distributed to students in public schools and universities. Good results were being achieved at all levels of education. A decree had been issued in 2020 to bring crèches under the authority of the Ministry of Education, in recognition of the important role that education should play in early childhood care.

23. Citizenship had been taught in secondary schools as a stand-alone subject since 2004, with the aim of increasing awareness of human rights and broadening students' cultural and language skills. Efforts were ongoing to strengthen and streamline the curriculum in that area.

24. **Mr. Matar** (Bahrain) said that, in accordance with the Reform and Rehabilitation Institutions Act, pretrial detainees and convicted prisoners were given the opportunity to continue their education, and the Ministry of Education and prison authorities provided them with everything they needed to do so. If they wished to pursue university studies, they were even allowed to leave the prison to sit exams externally. In 2022, approximately 405 detainees and 35 juvenile detainees were enrolled in school programmes. A range of programmes were run for detainees, including workshops on citizenship and behaviour and cultural, religious and sporting activities. Vocational training was also provided, allowing detainees to learn a trade, such as electrician or carpenter, to support their future reintegration into society and earning potential. Artisanal products made by detainees were sold in various retail outlets, allowing the detainees to earn an income. There were also rehabilitation programmes for detainees with substance addiction problems.

25. **Ms. Al Khalifa** (Bahrain), speaking via video link, said that, during the pandemic, the cultural sector had switched to organizing online events. A number of inclusive and interactive online cultural, artistic and literary initiatives and competitions had been launched with the objective of ensuring that the Bahraini public continued to enjoy their cultural rights. The Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities ensured that 90 per cent of the cultural activities it organized, such as festivals and exhibitions, were accessible free of charge. Despite the difficulties posed by the pandemic, cultural life had continued. Workshops and training courses had been organized. Bahrain had also continued to participate in international exhibitions and festivals. In recent years, many books and journals had been published and translated in Bahrain. The Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities cooperated with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization and the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and exchanged experience and skills with other organizations on a regular basis. Bahrain believed that cultural exchange strengthened its relations with other countries and would lead to greater progress and partnership and support the universal values of justice, equality and solidarity.

26. **Mr. Al-Haidan** (Bahrain), speaking via video link, said that Bahrain had been one of the first countries to guarantee housing for a very large number of its inhabitants. The Government had invested \$10 million in schemes such as the construction of housing units and residential complexes for low-income households. Agreements had been drawn up with financial institutions to provide long-term loans to approximately 10,000 households. Numerous large-scale building projects had been undertaken in various locations nationwide with the aim of upholding the rights of as many people as possible in the area of housing.

27. **Mr. Hennebel** said that he would be interested to know how, when implementing the Covenant, the State party dealt with any incompatibilities with the Arab Charter on Human Rights, certain provisions of which were more protective than those contained in the Covenant.

28. **Ms. Alsayed** (Bahrain), speaking via video link, said that the Government had presented its first report on its implementation of the Arab Charter on Human Rights in 2019. The Government was committed to ensuring complementarity between all regional and international human rights instruments.

29. **Mr. Mijbel** (Bahrain), speaking via video link, said that the provisions of all international instruments ratified by Bahrain were binding on all national institutions and took precedence over national legislation. The Government was committed to their implementation.

30. **The Chair**, welcoming the State party's preparedness to participate in dialogue with the Committee, said that he encouraged it to proceed with ratification of the Optional Protocols to both the Covenant and the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The Committee would study in detail the additional information that the delegation had undertaken to provide, notably on business and human rights, and looked forward to further dialogue in the future concerning the allegations of repression of demonstrations and censure of journalists in the country.

31. **Mr. Bucheeri** (Bahrain) thanked the Committee for the constructive dialogue and said that the country's leadership set great importance on promoting a culture of human rights in the country, based on the rule of law and the principles of tolerance and acceptance of others.

*The meeting rose at 5.05 p.m.*