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## US-backed regime crushes protest in Bahrain

By Bill Van Auken

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The US-backed monarchy in the island Gulf state of Bahrain unleashed intense repression on Monday and Tuesday to break up demonstrations by thousands of workers and youth marking the first anniversary of the brutally crushed pro-democracy protests that began on February 14, 2011.

The Bahraini protesters have demanded an end to the dictatorial rule of the al-Khalifa a regime, a Sunni monarchy, as well as jobs and equal rights for the country's Shia majority, 70 percent of the population, which is subject to systematic discrimination.

Bahrain's capital of Manama and its surrounding suburbs were placed under a tightened de facto state of siege with armored anti-riot cars lining the streets, thousands of police and troops deployed and barbed wire strung around the iconic Pearl Roundabout, the equivalent of Cairo's Tahrir Square.

Demonstrators had camped out in the roundabout for a month until the monarchy of King Hamad al-Khalifa used armed force to disperse them. Troops and tanks from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait were brought in over the causeway linking Bahrain to the mainland and initiated a military crackdown that included the demolition of the monument in the Pearl Roundabout, for 30 years a landmark in Bahrain.

Monday's clashes began when thousands of demonstrators broke off from a regime-sanctioned protest of over 10,000 on the outskirts of Manama organized by Al Wefaq, the Shia opposition party, whose 18 parliamentary delegates resigned last year to protest the repression.

Police attacked the demonstrators with tear gas, rubber bullets and stun grenades. Some of the demonstrators reportedly responded by hurling rocks and Molotov cocktails at the security forces.

The police also laid siege to predominantly Shia villages around the country, including Bilad al-Qadim.

On Tuesday, intense repression continued, with police making pre-emptive arrests aimed at stopping a planned march on the Pearl Roundabout and staging raids on homes suspected of harboring anti-regime demonstrators.

Among those arrested in the crackdown were two human rights lawyers from the United States, who were promptly deported.

These latest attacks come on top of a year of unrelenting repression. At least 60 people have been killed by security forces, given Bahrain's small population one of the highest per capita death rates of the various Arab countries that have seen popular upheavals over the past year. Hundreds more are missing. Hundreds remain political prisoners and many have faced severe torture.

Nearly 2,000 people were fired from their jobs on charges of participating in the protests and have yet to be reinstated.

What little existed of an independent media has been systematically repressed, with journalists murdered in prison, tortured, detained and assaulted to silence any criticism of the ruling monarchy. Karim Fakhrawi, a founder of *Al-Wasat*, the only newspaper not under the control of the regime, died in police custody last April. Online journalist Abduljalil Alsingace, an academic and human rights activists, was sentenced last June by a special military court to life in prison for writings critical of the regime.

Among the most infamous acts of the ruling monarchy is the prosecution of 47 doctors, nurses and medical workers before a military court on charges of plotting against the regime. Detained and in some cases tortured, their sole offense was treating those wounded in government repression. On the eve of the latest demonstrations, the regime sent a decree to hospitals demanding that all those brought in for treatment be reported to the security forces.

The ruling monarchy has attributed the clashes to "a large group of terrorists", "extremists" and "thugs".

This slander was swiftly echoed by the British government, whose Foreign Office issued a warning Monday of a supposed "a general threat from terrorism in Bahrain."

The United States has also backed up the Bahraini regime. On the eve of the protests, top US Middle East envoy Jeffrey Feltman paid a two-day visit to Manama for discussions on an upcoming “Friends of Syria” conference scheduled for next week to promote regime change in Syria. A State Department spokesman claimed that Feltman also raised the issue of “human rights”.

In reality, Washington has agreed to give its tacit backing to repression by the Bahraini regime and its fellow reactionary monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia, while these regimes have, incredibly, put themselves forward as the champions of “democracy” in Syria to pave the way for Western intervention.

Even more decisive from the standpoint of US interests, Bahrain is the headquarters for the American Navy’s Fifth Fleet, with some 6,200 sailors, civilian contractors and family members stationed in the country. The base provides the most important facility for US war preparations against Iran, which lies just across the Persian Gulf.

In this sense, Washington’s support for the regime’s repression in Bahrain and its demand for the fall of the Assad government over repression in Syria are contradictory only in appearance. Both are part of a calculated imperialist strategy aimed at extending US hegemony in the region and preparing for military confrontation with Iran.

Both the US and Britain are intimately involved in the repression in Bahrain. Washington has sold the ruling monarchy some \$1.4 billion in arms since 2000 and is pushing through a new \$53 million weapons deal. And the Fifth Fleet stands as a military guarantor of the regime’s stability.

For its part, the British government granted over \$2 million worth of arms export licenses between July and September of last year alone, according to information compiled by the Campaign Against Arms Trade. And a recent report by Amnesty International indicated that Britain has authorized the sale to the Bahraini regime of tear gas, grenade launchers and riot guns.

Helping to coordinate the repression is one John Yates, who resigned his post as assistant commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police in the midst of the Murdoch media phone hacking scandal last July.

Yates, hired by the monarchy to “reform” the Bahraini police force, told the *Daily Telegraph* that he intended to introduce the British police tactic of “kettling” as a means of suppressing demonstrations.

Echoing the views of his new paymasters, Yates denounced the protests as “just vandalism, rioting on the streets ... acts of wanton damage that are destroying the economy.”