



David Lappartient  
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Cc. Jean-Etienne Amaury, Christian Prudhomme

28 June 2019

Dear Mr Lappartient,

In light of the imminent commencement of the 2019 Tour de France, we are writing to register our concerns about the participation of the Bahrain-Merida Pro Cycling team in the race.

As you will be aware, Bahrain-Merida is co-owned and funded by the government of Bahrain and the promotion of the Kingdom of Bahrain on the international stage is a stated goal of the team. The Bahraini government has a reputation for using high-profile sporting events to divert international attention from the country's appalling human rights record and we are concerned that Bahrain-Merida's participation in UCI competitions is consistent with these aims.

We understand that their participation is a result of the decision by the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) to renew their WorldTeam license, announced in December 2018. As the worldwide governing body for cycling, UCI has a responsibility to ensure that WorldTeam competitors are consistent with the values outlined in your [Code of Ethics](#). The Bahraini government's treatment of its citizens is inimical to the integrity and reputation of international cycling and the UCI, and therefore we urge you to consider Bahrain's human rights record when reviewing Bahrain-Merida's license application for the 2020 cycling season.

### **Bahrain Human Rights Abuses**

We are alarmed that financial support for the Bahrain-Merida team stems primarily from the Bahraini government, despite their systematic attacks on freedom of expression and assembly. Bahrain's human rights record and the situation for civil society have deteriorated substantially following the Bahraini uprising in 2011, especially during the past two years. Freedom of expression and press freedom are severely curtailed in Bahrain with journalists, activists and human rights defenders ruthlessly [targeted](#).

At least six journalists are currently imprisoned in Bahrain because of their work, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists' 2018 prison [census](#). In 2017, the only independent newspaper, [Al-Wasat](#), was forcibly closed and its employees dismissed or arrested. That year, the Ministry of Information Affairs effectively [blocked](#) the license renewal of several journalists working for foreign news agencies. Photojournalists and reporters for the Associated Press, Agence France-Press and a cameraman for Reuters were all denied license renewal.

Particularly concerning is the central role played by Prince Nasser bin Hamad Al Khalifa, son of the ruling King of Bahrain. Prince Nasser launched the cycling team in January 2017 with an estimated [£13.7m budget](#) funded by the state of Bahrain and [confirmed](#) to general manager Brent Copeland that the team will continue beyond its initial three-year contract.

During the Bahraini uprising in 2011, [credible allegations](#) emerged regarding Prince Nasser's personal involvement in the torture of Bahraini dissidents. In response to the massive popular protests, Prince Nasser [threatened](#) that "*whoever calls for the fall of the regime, may a wall fall on his head ... whether he is an athlete, socialite or politician, whatever he is... Today is the judgment day.*"

Subsequently, Prince Nasser [formed](#) an investigative committee mandated to identify and punish athletes for joining pro-democracy protests. As a [previous](#) president of Bahrain's Olympic Committee and current president of the Supreme Council for Youth and Sport, this sanctioning committee was under Prince Nasser's jurisdiction. In all, some 150 athletes, coaches and referees were [suspended](#) across the sports of football, basketball and handball. In 2014, the British High Court [overturned](#) a ruling granting Prince Nasser diplomatic immunity from prosecution in relation to torture allegations levelled against him.

The persecution of athletes who criticise the government continues to this day. In November 2018, Bahraini refugee footballer [Hakeem AlAraibi](#) was detained in Thailand for over 70 days under an Interpol red notice [triggered](#) by the Bahraini government. He was a [victim](#) of the crackdown on pro-democracy athletes in 2011 and was later sentenced *in absentia* to 10 years imprisonment over fabricated charges. Hakeem's ordeal garnered significant international attention, with [FIFA](#), the [World Players Association](#) and the [International Olympic Committee](#) all publicly calling for his release. Notably, Prince Nasser failed to comment on Hakeem's case, despite being the highest sporting authority in the country.

## **Sportwashing**

Bahrain's sponsorship of sporting events like the Bahrain Grand Prix and the Royal Windsor Horse Show are aimed at [sanitising](#) the country's dismal human rights record, a practice that has come to be known as "[sportwashing](#)". The Bahrain-Merida team is among the first World Tour cycling teams registered in the Middle East and has attracted significant positive press coverage. Prince Nasser himself has [admitted](#) that "the impact of this experience on our country has been excellent... and Bahrain is much more known in the world." International reputation appears to be the principal concern for the Bahraini government - highlighted by the absence of Bahraini nationals in the Bahrain-Merida team, making it the only geographically designated ProCycling team without home-grown talent.

Due to their immense cultural significance, the Bahraini government goes to extreme lengths to prevent people criticising their sponsorship of sporting events. Security services routinely use disproportionate force to disperse peaceful protests and protestors are frequently harassed and arrested. In 2017, [Najah Yusuf](#) was arrested, sexually assaulted and sentenced to three years' imprisonment, partly for her criticism of the Bahrain Grand Prix on social media. That same year, Bahrain carried out [reprisals](#) against family members of those protesting King Hamad's invitation to the [Royal Windsor Horse Show](#), which he regularly attends to flout his friendship with Queen Elizabeth.

In the past, NGOs have raised Bahrain's involvement in both Formula One's [Bahrain Grand Prix](#) and the [Royal Windsor Horse Show](#) with the UK National Contact Point for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) guidelines, who have deemed that the complaints were warranted.

The Tour de France is one of the world's oldest and most respected sporting events. It would be regrettable if Bahrain-Merida's participation in the Tour de France became another means for Bahrain to sportswash their international reputation. Furthermore, due to their history of targeting protestors, we are concerned that Bahrain-Merida's participation in UCI competitions poses a potential security risk to those who may choose to criticise or protest against the team's involvement, both to the individuals themselves and their families.

## **Concluding Remarks**

We surmise that the Bahraini government's disdain for international human rights legislation may place the Bahrain-Merida team in violation of Article 2 of the [UCI's Code of Ethics](#), which outlaws conduct "that damages the integrity and reputation of cycling and in particular to illegal, immoral and unethical behaviour." Additionally, Article 5 demands that all parties, including license holders, "show commitment to an ethical attitude" and "fulfil their duties with due care and diligence."

Finally, the UCI is obliged to implement its corporate responsibility to respect human rights within its own operations and business relationships, in accordance with the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) (UNGP). This requires the UCI to make a constitutional human rights commitment, carry out human rights risk assessments, and conduct ongoing human rights due diligence to address its potential and actual negative impacts.

At a time where changes to the Ethics Commission have been [announced](#) to ensure good governance, it is imperative that UCI's conduct is consistent with upholding human rights. [FIFA's human rights policy](#) is in [accordance](#) with the UNGP while the Internal Olympic Committee has included the UNGP in its [Host City Contract](#) and in its [Sustainable Sourcing](#) code. Given that such organisations are making strides towards the protection of human rights in sports, the UCI should aspire to achieve similar goals.

**In light of the above, we urge you to disclose the findings of your ethical review of the Bahrain-Merida team referenced in your [announcement](#) of teams registered for the 2019 season on 11 December 2018 and to consider the human rights concerns raised in this letter when reviewing Bahrain-Merida's license for the 2020 season later this year, including a risk assessment of potential threats to protestors and critics.**

Yours Sincerely,

Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD)  
Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)  
Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR)  
Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)  
European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (ECDHR)  
Football Supporters Europe  
Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)  
International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)  
International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)  
Transparency International Germany  
World Players Association