



An Irish delegation to Bahrain left certain that doctors there had suffered human rights abuses, but embarrassed at how little they were able to offer in support, writes **Eoin O’Brien**

HIPPOCRATIC OATH

“I WENT home from my work as usual following a day of work as an oncologist at the Salmaniya Medical Centre. “I was awoken from sleep at 3am when the door of my apartment was kicked open and I was pulled from my bed by two men who then ransacked the flat, shook and searched my four-year-old child, packed my personal papers and computer, and then dragged me from my flat to an a van surrounded by police cars. “I protested that my child was alone and young and was told she would be looked after. I was taken to a room blindfolded and handcuffed with my hands behind my back. “After hours of standing against a wall I was verbally insulted and then placed in solitary confinement for 10 days in a small dirty cell, during which time I was tortured, sexually molested by both male and female interrogators and beaten with a hose on the back and neck. “I was then moved to a gaol where I could hear other prisoners being tortured and I was interrogated repeatedly. “I was filmed signing many papers, the content of which no longer mattered to me, but among which was a confession that I had stolen drugs from the hospital and that I had incited disturbance.” This harrowing account is typical of many reports from imprisoned doctors who have been released from prison, and from the spouses and children of doctors who remain in prison that I have heard first-hand during a recent visit to Bahrain.

Our delegation consisted of two doctors, Damian McCormack and me; three politicians, Senator Averil Power, David Andrews, former foreign affairs minister, and MEP Marian Harkin; two members of the humanitarian foundation Frontline, deputy director, Andrew Anderson, and Khalid Ibrahim; and a freelance photo journalist, Conor McCabe. During a two-day visit, we met close to 100 people from all sides of Bahraini life. We were brought to the house of a family that had suffered dearly in the aftermath of the protests, where 27 women and men were gathered to represent doctors who had been released from prison to await trial, and the spouses and children of doctors detained in prison. We were brought to a secret suburban location at night to meet ambulance drivers who had been taken from their ambulances, imprisoned and tortured, and medical students, some of whom have been prevented from continuing their studies. At our meeting with the doctors and their relatives, their fairness in acknowledging what had been good in the Bahrain health care system, their affection for Salmaniya Hospital where so many of them had served for many years, and their regard for the previous minister of health, who had resigned because he had failed to protect doctors, was in contrast to their sense of betrayal by RCSI-Bahrain and the fact that none from the many representatives of both the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) or Royal College of Physicians in Ireland (RCPI), who had



Bahraini army tanks in position near Pearl Square in Manan during riots in February. The crackdown included arrests of healthcare professionals from Salmaniya Hospital.

Picture: Getty Images

visited the country recently for the conferring of doctors, had made any attempt to contact the families of imprisoned health care workers. Our delegation was invited to separate meetings with the management of the Salmaniya Medical Complex, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The views expressed by these officials were largely repeated but in greater detail by Dr Fatima Al Balushi, minister of human rights and social development and acting minister of health. Dr Al Balushi, was erudite, confident and particularly concerned about the public image of Bahrain. In our preamble to all meetings, the similarities between Ireland and Bahrain were acknowledged — island communities, relatively small populations, religious conflicts (Catholic versus Protestant in Ireland, Sunni versus Shia in Bahrain), and the close medical ties between the islands for a quarter of a century. These niceties aside, we pointed out that Ireland differs in that freedom of speech was a cornerstone of our democracy, and most importantly, persons accused of felonies and crimes were innocent until proven guilty. We stressed that nowhere else in the



A Bahraini anti-government protester is taken to a hospital after being wounded during a demonstration in Manama, in February.

world had so many doctors and medical personnel been held incommunicado and allegedly tortured as in Bahrain, and that this was totally unacceptable to the ideals and

principles of European democracy. Dr Al Balushi stated that she was proud of the human rights achievements in Bahrain. She saw Bahrain as a model for the Middle East and a

champion for humanitarian issues, such as women’s rights and religious freedom; the Arab Spring had hit Bahrain like a tidal wave and brought the country to the verge of civil war; the protests, which had started peacefully, had soon escalated into chaos, with Salmaniya Hospital being captured by demonstrators; a number of doctors have been implicated on film and the guilty doctors would be subject to legal process for subverting the primary code of providing care to the wounded. Asked whether the allegations of kidnapping, detention and torture were true, she answered that if such was found to be the case, the perpetrators would be duly prosecuted. Mistakes had been acknowledged by the King and would be redressed by the appointment of an independent commission to investigate violations of human rights, the transfer of trials from military to civilian courts and the release of most of medical detainees. However, she said, the doctors remaining in custody could not be released because they present a threat to national security. She agreed, though, to approach the king with a request from us for their release.

At the end of our visit, each member of our delegation was in no doubt but that doctors had been subjected to human rights abuses that included kidnapping, detention without trial in solitary confinement, and the extraction of confessions under torture. The failure of the Bahrain authorities to recognise the importance of restoring the medical profession to its former status will have far-reaching consequences for the island. We left Bahrain moved by the gratitude of the doctors and their families for our support from outside the country, and embarrassed that we were offering so little in the face of the enormity of their suffering and courage, and knowing that we would return soon to the security of democracy leaving them to endure sleepless nights in anticipation of the unknown vicissitudes that may beset a country denied the right of democratic expression. ■ Professor Eoin O’Brien is former president of the Irish Heart Foundation and professor of molecular pharmacology at the Conway Institute of Biomolecular and Biomedical Research in University College Dublin.

US debt sows seeds of next crisis

AVERTING a US debt default would solve only the immediate fiscal problem for the West and its big creditors in Asia. The US sovereign debt path remains unsustainable. Investors are growing reluctant to lend cheap money to a handful of European countries. Either of these developments could erupt into another bout of market-bruising uncertainty. A Reuters examination of Asia’s finances shows the region as a whole boasts healthy government balance sheets, with vast amounts of reserves on hand to counter any sudden reversal of investment flows. Countries such as Singapore and China are already moving to cut their exposure to the US dollar, and Washington’s brush with default may hasten the shift. But there are a few vulnerable spots. In Taiwan, for example, foreigners hold \$480 billion (€337bn) worth of stocks and bonds, eclipsing the country’s \$400bn in reserves. In South Korea, foreigners hold almost \$450bn in stocks and bonds, well above its \$304bn in reserves. New Zealand and Malaysia also have foreign stock and bond ownership that outstrip reserves. A sovereign debt crisis in the West could spark a sudden withdrawal of that foreign money, much like it did after the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy in 2008.

Emily Kaiser looks at the likely next step in the global debt crisis, and reveals why China is no longer dependant on US treasury debt

The debt deal that President Barack Obama announced in Washington on Sunday appeared to neutralise the immediate US default threat. Next on the worry list — at least chronologically — is the growing number of European economies struggling to borrow at affordable interest rates. Spain and Italy have paid much higher rates to sell their debt in recent weeks, feeding worries that the eurozone’s debt troubles will not stop with Greece, Ireland and Portugal. Although Asia is more exposed to US government debt than European, it is more reliant on European banks than US ones for private financing. European banks’ total claims on Asia, excluding Japan, were \$1.3 trillion as of the end of 2010, more than three times that of US banks, brokerage Nomura estimated.

Should the situation in Europe worsen, banks might pull funding with little warning. Robert Prior-Wandesforde, a Credit Suisse economist based in Singapore, said another banking crisis in the Western world was “highly likely” and it was easy to envisage this leading to a credit crunch in Asia. He listed Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea as most at risk to a sudden flight from a banking crisis, but all of Asia would suffer from the accompanying drop in global confidence and demand. “In short, the region would do very well to avoid a credit crunch,” he said. As long as the West avoids a fresh crisis, Asia could see more foreign investment money pour in, drawn by its strong growth rates and healthy public finances. “There is evidence that investors all over the world are looking at emerging markets as safe havens rather than the US dollar or US treasuries,” said Mark Mobius, Singapore-based executive chairman of Templeton Asset Management’s emerging markets group. Some government officials in the region concur, and are directing more of their holdings toward emerging markets. Singapore’s \$300bn state-run investment fund, GIC, said last week it had cut its investment in developed markets to 34% of its portfolio in the fiscal year that ended in March, down



President Barack Obama speaks from the White House briefing room about a deal being reached to raise the US debt limit.

Picture: AP Photo

from 41%. It increased its investment in emerging market equities to 15% from 10%. Not surprisingly, China stands out in Asia as the most exposed to the US dollar but also the most prepared to withstand a financial blow. With \$3.2tn in reserves, it is hard to imagine any scenario where an overseas crisis wipes out that cushion.

China’s problem is that an estimated two-thirds of that pot is invested in dollar-denominated assets, and economists widely expect the green-back to weaken in the next few years. China’s foreign exchange regulator made it crystal clear last week that it intends to shrink the dollar exposure. In an announcement on Thursday which was overshadowed by the US

debt drama, the State Administration of Foreign Exchange said it would press ahead with diversifying reserves. One sentence stands out: “We will take comprehensive measures to promote economic restructuring and transform economic development, to fundamentally slow down the foreign exchange inflow, and to promote a better balance of international payments.” In other words, China’s reserves growth will slow, and so will its need to buy US treasury debt. That is a worrisome development for Washington, which will need to entice other investors to pick up the slack. The debt deal that Obama outlined was short on details of how the US would cap rising healthcare costs, the largest single threat to fiscal stability as its population ages. Beijing’s latest five-year economic plan calls for enhancing the social safety net and raising the minimum wage by 84%, which should spur higher consumption. Consumer spending accounts for roughly one-third of China’s economy, less than half the share in the US. Morgan Stanley Asia’s non-executive chairman Stephen Roach has claimed China was “moving now to embrace a new model which will stimulate internal private consumption”. “They are moving away from the dollar whether we like it or not,” he said.

Reuters