Egyptian gas will not start flowing into Israel immediately. The final section of the pipeline is yet be built. According to EMG officials it should be completed by mid-2006, although Ben Eliezer seemed to think two years a more realistic deadline.

Meanwhile, Egypt's natural gas exports are just starting to take off as its LNG plants go online. February saw the first shipments of natural gas to Spain and several new plants should soon start exporting to France, Italy and the United States. Last year also saw the opening of a pipeline to Jordan.

In fact, by the time exports to Israel really get going, these will only be a fraction of Egypt's total gas exports, which are expected to be worth $11.8bn a year by 2010.

Behind the News

Moving backwards in Bahrain

Bahrain seemed to be on a quicker path to democratization and respect for human rights than any of its Gulf neighbours. Now, as **Brian Evans** reports, the human rights situation gives serious cause for concern.

Bahrain's beleaguered experiment in political reform has suffered a number of blows in recent months. On 5 May 2005, Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, the former executive director of the banned Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR), gave a talk at the US-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where he warned that sectarian discrimination and economic disparities were threatening to return Bahrain to the strife-torn days of the 1990s.

One might expect a degree of exaggeration from a human rights advocate who, just six months earlier, had been arrested, convicted and sentenced for provocative criticisms of the government, but similar charges were directed at Bahrain from several different quarters during May.

On 3 May, the Paris-based Reporters sans Frontières issued its Worldwide *Press Freedom Index* for 2004, which ranked Bahrain a dismal 143rd out of 167 countries (North Korea was bottom). This marked a steep decline from the number 67 ranking Bahrain received when the *Index* first came out in 2002, suggesting a disturbing return to a more repressive environment. On 6 May, the International Crisis Group (ICG) issued a report on Bahrain. *Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge* warned of "increasingly aggressive moves by the government, which more and more resorts to police tactics and authoritarian measures to maintain order." And it observed that, while "some opposition members advocate reconciliation, others are pushing for a more dramatic showdown".

On 20 May, the UN Committee Against Torture reported on Bahrain at the end of its 34th session, expressing concern about the "persistent gap between the legislative framework and its practical implementation with regard to the obligations of the UN Convention Against Torture."

Bahrainis protests against impunity for human rights violators

The committee also called for changes to the infamous Decree 56 of 2002 that granted immunity to officials who had committed torture and other abuses prior to February 2001 (MEI 719), and challenged the lack of a comprehensive definition of torture in Bahraini law.

In short, according to the committee, while torture has declined in Bahrain, little has changed to prevent it from making a comeback.

In 2000, as King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa consolidated his power, the atmosphere was decidedly more optimistic. After the violence and repression of the 1990s, pledges of political reform were enthusiastically welcomed. Hundreds of political prisoners were freed and exiles allowed to return. In February 2001, Bahrainis overwhelmingly approved the Charter for National Action, which promised to set the stage for political reforms, including

amendment of the 1973 Constitution to ensure that an elected parliament had sole legislative authority.

But a year later, the king produced a completely new Constitution that did no such thing. Instead, it included an unelected upper chamber of parliament that had equal powers with the elected lower chamber. Then in October 2002, the king issued Decree 56, sparking a wave of protests and signalling that the road to reform was going to be bumpy indeed. Elections that month, intended to be a historic return to the parliamentary democracy short-circuited in 1975, were instead boycotted by four major political organizations. The reform process has been in gradual decline since then, culminating in the arrest of Khawaja and the disbandment of the BCHR. This arrest sparked more street protests, and, despite his release following a royal pardon in November 2004, the protests have continued, including a demonstration in March 2005 reportedly attended by thousands on the island of Sitra, a predominantly poor Shi'ite community south of Manama, the capital.

Economic disparities

In Bahrain, the problems are as much economic as political. For here, unlike the other Gulf Cooperation Council states, poverty is a reality. A study commissioned by the crown prince ("Reforming Bahrain's Labour Market") predicted that by 2013 unemployment could rise to 35% of the population, with 70% of those employed working below their skill level and, more important, beneath their expectations.

Even more troubling is the fact that economic disparities fall along sectarian lines. According to the ICG report, the predominantly Shi'ite villages outside Manama "exhibited dilapidated housing, often with as many as ten or more family members in three-room mud hovels. In some instances, families shared space inside their homes with livestock, creating wretched conditions and clear health risks. There are over 40,000 families waiting for government-promised subsidized housing." The report concludes that these villages are "suburban shanty towns from which residents have no hope of escape".

Of course, discrimination against the Shi'ite community, who comprise some 70% of the population, occurs beyond the economic sphere. Segregated residential areas, under-representation in government, and the granting of citizenship to large numbers of Sunnis, particularly from Saudi Arabia, continue to cause sectarian tensions. This discrimination, in which the minority Sunni population headed by the Al Khalifa ruling family has historically held a disproportionate share of power over the Shi'ite majority, has been at the root of Bahrain's conflicts, including the large-scale violence of the 1990s, and its elimination would appear to be the only sure way to end the cycle of conflict. The great hope in 2001 that this was finally going to happen appears to be fading fast.

Further complicating matters are the issues of women's rights, and the "security climate" since 11 September 2001. Rights advocates have campaigned to take issues of importance to women out of religious or family courts and place them in civil courts, but there has been much resistance to this, particularly from Shi'ite religious figures who see this effort as another way of reducing the community's power and influence. So, ironically, progress on women's rights may have the effect of exacerbating sectarian tensions.

Efforts to support women's rights may also prompt the government to deploy further repressive measures. In May, Ghada Jamshir, head of the Women's Petition Committee and president of the Partnership for Combating Violence against Women in Bahrain, faced three separate trials for her criticism of family court judges under broadly defined charges of slander that one needs no imagination to assume could be used against a wide variety of critics of the government. By the end of June two of the three cases had been dismissed, but the third is still pending, scheduled for a hearing on 5 October.

Law on terror

The international security climate has also contributed to setbacks in political reform, both in Bahrain and throughout the region, as the "war on terror" has become a convenient excuse for the continuation or resumption of repressive behaviour.

In the draft anti-terrorism law which the government submitted to parliament in March 2005, terrorism is defined in very broad terms as any "threat or use of force or violence", even if the results are as vague or relatively innocuous as "harming national unity", or "obstructing the public authorities or religious buildings or educational faculties from doing their work". In Article 6, the draft law provides for the death penalty for "whoever creates, establishes, organizes or manages, in violation of the provisions of the law, an association, body, organization, group, gang or a branch thereof" that employs this sweeping definition of terrorism in some way.

Human rights advocates in Bahrain have demanded that this proposed law be retracted or seriously amended. And the International Commission of Jurists, in a submission to the UN Committee Against Torture, cited the draft law for both its "broad and unspecific definitions" and its "erosion of judicial safeguards against torture". The UN committee, in its 20 May report, agreed.

It remains to be seen whether the government of Bahrain will be deterred by such concerns. But as economic and sectarian tensions are increasing, the emergence of such a powerful new tool of repression does not bode well for the future of the reform project introduced with so much hope back in 2000.

Brian Evans is the volunteer Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia country specialist for Amnesty International USA. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of Amnesty.