

PUBLIC

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UA 43/06 Incommunicado detention/ fear of torture

IRAN At least 173 members of the Nematollahi Sufi community

At least 173 members of the Nematollahi Sufi Muslim community are detained incommunicado, reportedly at Fajr prison in the city of Qom, where it is feared that they are being tortured, possibly in order to extract 'confessions'.

The Nematollahi Sufi are Shi'a Muslims. Those detained were among 1,200 Nematollahi Sufis arrested on 13 February, when an apparently peaceful demonstration against an order by the security forces to evacuate the community's place of worship- known as a Hosseiniye- by 11 February was violently suppressed by security forces and members of the Hojatieh and Fatemiyon groups (organized pro-government groups).

According to reports, those detained are being interrogated at Fajr prison in Qom, and are allegedly being tortured in order to force them to sign pre-prepared false confessions claiming that the protest held by the Sufi group had political motivations and links to anti-government groups. It is alleged that they will read these false confessions on national television. Families of those detained have reportedly been unable to obtain official information about their whereabouts, legal status or health, and they have not had access to lawyers. Lawyer Bahman Nazari, himself a Sufi Muslim, had reportedly travelled from the city of Tabriz in northwest Iran to Qom in order to try and represent the detainees. He was arrested as soon as he approached officials and presented his practice licence.

The protest began on 9 February, with some members of the Nematollahi Sufi community inside their place of worship, and others stationed outside. The number of protesters swelled as hundreds of Nematollahi Sufis, including many women and children, travelled from other parts of the country to attend. Security forces, including anti-riot police, took up positions around the Hosseiniye. At around 3pm on 13 February they set a deadline for the Sufis to evacuate it. Members of the Fatemiyon and Hojatieh groups also reportedly surrounded the place of worship, shouting slogans such as "Death to Sufis" and "Sufi-ism is a British plot", and distributed leaflets alleging that Sufis are enemies of Islam. In response, some of the Sufis held up photographs of the late Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of Iran's Islamic Republic, and photographs of relatives who were killed fighting for their country in the Iran-Iraq war, to show that they were not opposing the government and to emphasise that they are an integral part of Iranian society.

The security forces then moved in at around 4pm, supported by the Hojatieh and Fatemiyon groups. They attacked the protesters outside the Hosseiniye and stormed the building, using tear gas and explosives. They allegedly beat many protesters, and, according to some reports, set light to the centre. The next day the Hosseiniye and neighbouring houses were demolished using bulldozers. Around 1,200 protesters were arrested and taken away on buses to unknown locations. Some, including people with serious injuries, were reported to have been transported to a sports stadium for interrogation. The detainees were interrogated, and many were allegedly tortured or ill-treated. Most of the Nematollahi Sufis have now been released, but 173 are still being held. Those released are said to have been required to sign papers as a condition of their release agreeing that that they will not attend any Sufi gatherings in Qom and that they will present themselves to the Intelligence Office in their home towns. Some have reportedly been required to sign documents renouncing Sufism.

Arrest warrants have reportedly been issued for the principal Sufi preacher of Qom, Seyed Ahmadi Shariati, and the four lawyers who had previously been acting on behalf of the group- Amir Eslami, Omid Behrouzi, Gholamreza Harsimi and Farshid Yadollahi.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The protest and its repression by the authorities came amid concern about what appears to be increasing "demonization" of the Sufi Muslim group. In September 2005, a religious jurist in Qom, Ayatollah Hossein Nouri-Hamedani, called for a crackdown on Sufi groups in Qom, labelling them a "danger to Islam". Recent weeks had seen hostile articles published in the newspapers *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* and *Kayhan*. On 15 February, Qom Governor Abbas Mohtaj confirmed to *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* that 1,000 people had been arrested and 200 injured following the protest. He accused the Sufis of participating in a foreign plot against the Iranian state, claiming "The arrogant powers are exploiting every opportunity to create insecurity in our country and [the Sufi's] inks to foreign countries are evident." On 21 February, the Prosecutor-General of Qom claimed that only 10 to 15 of those arrested were still in custody.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Persian, English, Arabic or your own language:

- expressing concern at the incommunicado detention in Fajr prison, Qom, of 173 members of the Nematollahi Sufi community following their arrest on 13 February, after an apparently peaceful demonstration to protest against an order to evacuate their centre of worship (Hosseiniye);
- expressing concern at reports that the detainees have allegedly been tortured during interrogation, apparently in order to force them to sign pre-prepared confessions, which they may be asked to read on national television;
- reminding the authorities that confessions extracted under duress are prohibited by Article 38 of the constitution of Iran, which says that "All forms of torture for the purpose of extracting confession or acquiring information are forbidden";
- calling on the authorities to grant the detainees immediate access to their families, lawyers, and any necessary medical treatment;
- calling for them to be released immediately and unconditionally unless they are to face recognizably criminal charges and to receive fair and prompt trials in accordance with their rights under international law;
- calling for an independent investigation, the result of which should be made public, into reports that security forces and members of Hojatieh and Fatemiyon groups used excessive force against peaceful protesters.

APPEALS TO:

Leader of the Islamic Republic

His Excellency Ayatollah Sayed 'Ali Khamenei, The Office of the Supreme Leader
Shoahada Street, Qom, Islamic Republic of Iran

Fax: + 98 251 7 774 2228 (mark "FAO the Office of His Excellency, Ayatollah al Udhma Khamenei")

Email: info@leader.ir OR istiftaa@wilayah.org

Salutation: Your Excellency

Head of the Judiciary

His Excellency Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi
Ministry of Justice, Park-e Shahr, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

Email: via the judiciary website: www.iranjudiciary.org/feedback_en.html

Salutation: Your Excellency

COPIES TO:

Minister of the Interior

Hojjatoleslam Mustafa Purmohammadi

Ministry of the Interior, Dr Fatemi Avenue, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

Email: ravabetomomi@moi.gov.ir

Fax: +98 21 8896203 / 8899547 / 6650203

and to diplomatic representatives of Iran accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 5 April 2006.