

URGENT ACTION

AZERBAIJANIS ARRESTED IN LAKE PROTESTS

Around 70 Iranian Azerbaijanis were reportedly arrested on 2 April during peaceful demonstrations in Tabriz, and about 20 others in Oromieh, north-western Iran. The protesters were calling for Lake Oromieh to be saved, as it is at risk of drying out due to dam building. Most have been released but the whereabouts of at least five protesters remain unknown.

The demonstrations took place in Tabriz, Oromieh and reportedly other cities where Iranian Azerbaijanis live, calling on the Iranian authorities to remove dams on rivers feeding Lake Oromieh (also spelt Urmia, Urumieh, Oroumiye) which is at risk of drying. Similar to protests in previous years, the protesters brought glasses of water and poured them into the rivers feeding the lake or the lake itself. They also carried banners with slogans such as "Break down dams and let water flow into the Lake Urmia", "Lake Urmia has no water in it and [if] Azerbaijan does not wake up now, it will be too late" and "Long live Azerbaijan".

The demonstration in Tabriz took place by the Talkheh River (also called Aji Chai) where plain-clothed police and armed forces arrested up to 70 people and injured many. Those still in detention in Tabriz are said to include **Habib Pourvali, Jalil Alamdar Milani, Ali Salimi** and **Sa'id Siyami**. In Oromieh, the protest took place in a park in the city where up to 20 people were reportedly arrested including **Sa'id Khizirlou**. Most of those arrested are believed to have been released within 24 to 48 hours. The whereabouts of those still detained are unknown.

PLEASE WRITE IMMEDIATELY in Persian, English or your own language:

- Calling on the Iranian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Habib Pourvali, Jalil Alamdar Milani, Ali Salimi, Sa'id Siyami and Sa'id Khizirlou and any other detained protesters, if they were arrested in connection with the peaceful expression of their views or participation in a peaceful gathering, as they would be prisoners of conscience;
- Urging the authorities to immediately disclose their whereabouts and to ensure that they are protected from torture and other ill-treatment and have access to a lawyer, their families and any medical treatment they might require;
- Urging the authorities to remove unlawful restrictions on freedoms of expression, association and assembly in Iran.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 16 MAY 2011 TO:

Head of East Azerbaijan Province
Judiciary

Hojjatoleslam Sharifi,
Judiciary of East Azerbaijan,
Central Complex,
Beginning of Vali-Asr Hill,
Tabriz, East Azerbaijan 5157733135,
Islamic Republic of Iran
Fax: 009841133201109

Salutation: Dear Sir

Head of West Azerbaijan Province
Judiciary

Hojjatoleslam Sayed Mohammad Ali
Mousavi
Judiciary of West Azerbaijan
Enghelab Square,
Oromieh, West Azerbaijan Province,
Islamic Republic of Iran
Email: info@dadgostary-ag.ir

Salutation: Dear Sir

And copies to:

Secretary General, High Council for
Human Rights

Mohammad Javad Larijani
High Council for Human Rights
[Care of] Office of the Head of the
Judiciary, Pasteur St., Vali Asr Ave.
south of Serah-e Jomhouri, Tehran
1316814737, Islamic Republic of Iran
Email: info@humanrights-iran.ir
(subject line: FAO Mohammad Javad
Larijani)

Salutation: Dear Sir

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Lake Oromieh is a salt lake in north-western Iran. The lake is situated between the Iranian provinces of East Azerbaijan and West Azerbaijan. It is the largest lake in the Middle East and the third largest salt water lake on earth. More than 40 dams have been built over 13 rivers that feed the lake and the recent draught, which started in 1999, has significantly decreased the annual amount of water the lake receives. This in turn has increased the salinity of its water which may lead to an ecological disaster in the region.

Iranian Azerbaijanis speak a Turkic language and are mainly Shi'a Muslims. As the largest minority in Iran, they make up 25-30 per cent of the population; they live mainly in the north and north-west of the country and in Tehran. Although generally well integrated into Iranian society, in recent years they have increasingly called for greater cultural and linguistic rights, including the implementation of their constitutional right to education in Azerbaijani Turkic. Article 15 of Iran's Constitution states that Persian is the official language of Iran and that "official documents, correspondence, and texts, as well as textbooks, must be in this language and script." It adds that "the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools, is allowed in addition to Persian."

A small minority want Iranian Azerbaijani provinces to break away from Iran and join with the Republic of Azerbaijan. In recent years the authorities have grown increasingly suspicious of Iran's minorities, many of which are situated in border areas, and have accused foreign powers such as the USA and the UK of stirring unrest among them. Those who seek to promote Azerbaijani cultural identity and linguistic rights are often charged with vaguely worded offences such as "acting against state security by promoting pan-Turkism".

Both before, and particularly since, the disputed presidential election in June 2009, the Iranian authorities have severely restricted freedom of expression in Iran, arresting journalists (of whom scores are believed to remain in detention), imposing restrictions on the use of the internet, including social networking sites, and shutting down newspapers. Demands by ethnic minority rights activists for greater rights have, for many years, been suppressed. This pattern continues in the context of a wide and generalized suppression of most forms of dissent over government policy.

In February 2010, Iran accepted several recommendations to guarantee freedom of expression and press activities made by other states as part of a review of its human rights record before the UN Human Rights Council in the framework of the Universal periodic review (see paragraph 90, recommendations 52-58 at http://www.upr-info.org/IMG/pdf/A_HRC_WG-6_7_L-11_Iran.pdf) but rejected other recommendations calling for an end to measures such as harassment and arbitrary arrest of writers, journalists and bloggers. It appears that, despite such public commitments, in practice, the Iranian authorities are continuing to disregard their human rights obligations relating to freedom of expression. Iran also rejected recommendations to take all appropriate measures to end all forms of discrimination and harassment against persons belonging to religious, ethnic, linguistic and other minorities (see paragraph 92).

At the beginning of March 2010, a wave of arrests of human rights defenders took place. Students, journalists and political activists have also continued to be targeted since the start of the year, and arrests have expanded to include lawyers, clerics, members of Iran's religious and ethnic minorities such as the Baha'is, Kurds and Azerbaijanis, and those with family links to members of banned groups.

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