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Iran: Investigate death of women's rights and peace activist at father's funeral

Amnesty International has called on the Iranian authorities to launch a prompt and impartial investigation into the circumstances of the death of Haleh Sahabi, a women's rights defender and member of the organization Mothers for Peace. The organization made its call in a letter to the Head of the Judiciary on 2 June 2011. She died, apparently after being struck by a member of the security forces, in the morning of 1 June 2011 during the funeral of her father, Ezzatollah Sahabi, a former parliamentarian and the leader of the Nationalist Religious Alliance.

Amnesty International received an eye-witness account stating that a member or members of the security forces manhandled Haleh Sahabi and hit her after she refused to relinquish a photograph of her father she was holding. Other accounts corroborate this: for example, Ahmed Montazeri, the son of the late Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, in an interview with the BBC gave his account of the death of Haleh Sahabi after being struck by members of the security forces. Official Iranian sources have attempted to downplay any involvement of security forces: an interview was broadcast on Iranian national television with a paramedic who is said to have treated her and according to whom Haleh Sahabi fainted, and then died, apparently of a cardiac arrest, while en route to the hospital.

Haleh Sahabi's own funeral, organized by security forces, was held at 10 pm later on the same day as her death. No autopsy was performed beforehand. Several mourners were reportedly arrested during her funeral. Amnesty International condemns the actions of security forces in restricting and disrupting both funerals, causing further distress to the mourners.

Haleh Sahabi, whom Amnesty International considered to be a prisoner of conscience, was serving a two-year prison sentence imposed after she was arrested in relation to her peaceful participation in a demonstration protesting at the inauguration of President Ahmadinejad in August 2009. She was reportedly beaten during her arrest. She was released on bail in mid-August 2009, but was later sentenced to two years' imprisonment and flogging after conviction of "propaganda against the system by repeated presence at illegal gatherings and disturbing public order." Branch 54 of the Appeals Court upheld the prison term in May 2010, but commuted the flogging sentence to a fine, and she began serving her prison sentence in January 2011. She had been granted temporary prison leave to visit her father in hospital before his death.

Amnesty International is concerned that Haleh Sahabi's treatment by security forces may have directly caused, or at the very least, contributed to her death. It should therefore be investigated promptly and impartially, in full compliance with the UN Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions. Article 9 of the UN Principles requires that "there shall be thorough, prompt and impartial investigation of all suspected cases of extra-legal, arbitrary and summary executions, including cases where complaints by relatives or other reliable reports suggest unnatural death in the above circumstances". Anyone found to have unlawfully caused Haleh Sahabi's death should be brought to justice, without recourse to the death penalty.

In its letter, Amnesty International also sought information about the individuals who were arrested during the funeral of Ezzatollah Sahabi, who were reported to include Dr. Habibollah Peyman, a leading member of the Nationalist Religious Alliance and a member of the National Peace Committee, a group which has called for an end to the use of violence in Iran; Hamid Ehrari; and Hamed Montazeri, the grandson of the late Grand Ayatollah Montazeri. Some or all of these may have since been released. The organization sought clarification of the names of all those arrested, where they are being held (if they have not already been released) and any charges which have been brought, or which may be brought, against them, and called for anyone held solely on account of their right to freedom of assembly to be released immediately and unconditionally. In the meantime, any still detained should be granted immediate access to their families and to lawyers of their choice and protected from torture or other ill-treatment.

Public Document

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