

IRAN

Investigation into wave of killings

On 10 December 1998, while the world was commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Mohammad Ja'far Puyandeh's body was found under a railway bridge in the southern suburbs of Tehran. The marks reportedly found on his corpse indicated that he had been beaten and strangled.

Mohammad Ja'far Puyandeh was a writer who had also campaigned for greater freedom of expression. At his burial five days later, one of his relatives placed a pen in his coffin saying, "Take your weapon with you." He was one of several writers and government critics who were killed or had "disappeared" in Iran towards the end of 1998. The killings created panic among Iran's intelligentsia, causing a number of writers, journalists and other critics of the government to go into hiding in fear for their lives.

Majid Sharif, a translator and journalist who regularly contributed to the banned publication Iran-e Farda (Tomorrow's Iran), went missing on 20 November 1998. Two days later, his brother was summoned to a Tehran mortuary to identify his body. Although the official coroner's report cited "heart failure" as the cause of death, friends and family of Majid Sharif reportedly regarded his death as suspicious since he had no apparent history of heart complaints.

Dariyush Foruhar and his wife, Parvaneh Eskandari, both prominent opposition activists, were stabbed to death in their Tehran home on 22 November. Dariyush Foruhar, leader of the Iran Nation Party, an illegal but tolerated opposition group, had served as a minister in the 1979 Provisional Government. He was known for his outspoken criticism of the authorities, in particular on the subject of human rights violations.

The killings continued. The body of Mohammad Mokhtari, a poet who had actively campaigned for the establishment of an independent writers' association, was identified by family members on 9 December. He had been missing for six days and had been strangled. Just two months earlier, Mohammad Mokhtari and five other members of the writers' association had been called to the Ministry of Information and told that their activities were illegal.

In what appeared to be a move connected with this pattern of killings, unidentified people contacted the elderly mother of Pirouz Davani, an opponent of the government who went missing in August 1998, and told her that her son had been killed. The shock proved too much for her and she suffered a fatal heart attack. To date, there has been no definite information as to the fate of Pirouz Davani.

Alarm was heightened by the fact that no one group was claiming responsibility for the murders, and theories abounded as to the identities and motivations of the killers. However, hopes for justice have been raised since the government set up an official investigation committee in December 1998. Less than one month later, on 5 January 1999, the Minister of Information announced that 10 "misguided and self-willed" members of the Ministry of Information had been arrested in connection with the killings.

While AI welcomes the moves to bring those responsible for the killings and "disappearances" to justice, it urges the authorities to ensure that these investigations, as well as any criminal

proceedings which result, comply with the minimum recognized international standards. AI is calling on the government to complete the investigations promptly, thoroughly and impartially; and to ensure that the investigative authorities have the power to obtain all necessary information; that the families of the victims, as well as their legal representatives, are informed of, and have access to, any hearing and information relevant to the investigations; and that the findings are made public.

The people of Iran have a right to know the truth about political killings and “disappearances”, and to see that all those who have been involved in human rights violations are held accountable for their actions. Only then will they be able to express their conscientiously held beliefs without fear.

Caption: A woman lights a candle for murdered opposition leader Dariyush Foruhar during his memorial service in Tehran, Iran, November 1998

GUATEMALA

Historic precedents set for human rights

In a landmark ruling, members of the security forces have been held directly responsible for carrying out human rights violations during the military repression that claimed tens of thousands of lives in the 36-year civil war.

In a February 1998 judgment welcomed by human rights organizations across Guatemala, a court imprisoned 11 members of the Voluntary Civil Defence Committees for firing indiscriminately on a crowd in the village of El Naranjal, Colotenango, in August 1993. One man, Juan Chanay Pablo, was killed in the shootings, and several others were wounded. The crowd had been peacefully demonstrating against the committees’ campaign of killings, threats and harassment. An appeal court later ruled that the men should serve 25-year prison sentences.

The court also kept open the possibility of bringing to justice the “material and intellectual” perpetrators – the members of the government and security forces who ordered, sanctioned or acquiesced in the Colotenango shootings. However, to date no current or former high-ranking officer in Guatemala has ever been held accountable for human rights violations.

After mediation by the Inter-American Court on Human Rights, the Guatemalan government in February 1997 took the unprecedented step of providing compensation to the victims of the shootings and to the Colotenango community. It is hoped that this settlement will set a precedent for compensation to be provided to other victims of human rights abuse during the civil war. For further information, see Guatemala: All the truth, justice for all (AI Index: AMR 34/02/98).

Caption: Members of the Voluntary Civil Defence Committees who were responsible for many human rights violations throughout the 1980s and 1990s

SYRIA

Caught in a regional conflict

Nuha Na'im 'Ali was 20 years old when she "disappeared" in Lebanon in June 1985. She was last seen as she tried to escape from a Palestinian refugee camp with two of her friends. AI believes that she was abducted by members of Harakat Amal (Amal Movement) and handed over to the Syrian security forces. Nearly 14 years later, AI has not received any clarification from the Syrian government to indicate whether she is dead or alive.

Nuha 'Ali is one of hundreds of people who were arbitrarily arrested or taken prisoner by the Syrian intelligence forces in Lebanon, Syria or at the Syria-Jordan border during the Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1990, or during the conflict between Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1980s. After the civil war ended, Lebanese nationals continued to be abducted by Syrian forces, or passed to Syria by Lebanon's military intelligence.

Often there were no witnesses to the arrests, and only years later did some families become aware that their relatives were alive in secret detention. Most are detained without charge or trial, while others have been sentenced after secret summary trials. For many families, the agony of uncertainty is prolonged by the authorities' refusal to respond to their requests for information. AI fears that some of those who "disappeared" may have been extrajudicially executed, but the majority are still believed to be alive in unacknowledged detention.

More than 400 political prisoners, including 121 Lebanese nationals, were released by the Syrian authorities during 1998, largely in response to growing international pressure (see AI News, July 1998). However, hundreds more Lebanese, Palestinians and Jordanians remain in detention in Syria, years after the regional conflict and political struggles that gave rise to their detention or "disappearance" have been resolved.

You can help by calling on the Syrian government to immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience and all long-term political detainees not given prompt and fair trials. Urge the authorities to disclose the fate and whereabouts of all those who have "disappeared". Send your letters to: His Excellency President Hafez al-Assad, Presidential Palace, Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic.

For further information, see Syria: Caught in a regional conflict – Lebanese, Palestinian and Jordanian political detainees in Syria (AI Index: MDE 24/01/99).

USA CAMPAIGN

Spreading the message of rights for all

Around the world, AI offices and groups have been blaring out the message Rights for All as the organization's campaign against human rights violations in the USA gets into full swing.

The aims of the campaign are two-fold: to inform the world about the harsh realities of everyday life in the self-proclaimed "land of the free" – police brutality, torture and abuse of prisoners, abuse of the rights of asylum-seekers, and one of the highest levels of executions on earth -- and to push for real improvements in the country's human rights record.

Following unprecedented levels of action by AI members, the international media in countries from Pakistan to Paraguay, from Norway to Nigeria, have taken up AI's concerns. At Marrakech bookfair in Morocco, 30 pages of a petition were filled up by people calling for an end to police

violence. In northern Finland, a statue of a “jailed Statue of Liberty” stood as a silent witness to AI’s lobbying. In Ghana, a national radio station relayed to its listeners comprehensive details of the campaign report. In Greece, within a few days of the campaign launch, the US embassy had contacted AI to hear our concerns face to face. At a meeting of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in Warsaw, Poland, AI addressed the plenary session, outlining its concerns on issues such as the use of the death penalty on juvenile offenders, mentally impaired people and foreign nationals.

Within the USA, AI’s concerns were featured coast to coast in publications such as the Washington Times and the Los Angeles Times. Regional human rights conferences and meetings highlighted particular human rights issues, such as a conference on “Wrongful Convictions and the Death Penalty” in which over 30 individuals released from death row after being found innocent took part.

There are already signs that, faced with an unprecedented level of pressure, authorities in the USA are beginning to wake up to their responsibilities.

Sixteen-year-old Shareef Cousin became the USA’s youngest death row inmate when he was sentenced to death in Louisiana in 1996. His trial was deeply flawed, with several allegations of malpractice made against the prosecution -- his case had become one of the major lobbying points of the campaign on the USA. On 8 January 1999 the news came that all charges of murder against Shareef Cousin had been dropped. In a letter to an AI member written just two weeks before, Shareef wrote, “Before your support, I was fighting this battle all alone. Now I know someone cares and this is enough to help me endure life behind bars.”

AI has also highlighted reports of human rights violations against women in Michigan’s prisons. The organization was invited to present its concerns during a debate on the issue called by Michigan Congressman John Conyers Jr. As a result of the debate, Detroit City Council passed a resolution calling on the State Governor to “end any and all prison practices which allow, promote and enforce violence against women in Michigan state prisons, including custodial sexual abuse and harassment”. The resolution went on to call for the ban on the use of restraints on pregnant women before and during labour, and an end to the practice of intimidation of women who report abusive and violent behaviour. This exciting development augurs well for human rights protection in the state.

Important developments have also occurred in Maine, where AI drew attention to reports of ill-treatment, including the use of restraint chairs, in Maine Youth Center. AI’s concerns attracted considerable media coverage with newspaper editorials supporting AI’s call for an independent investigation. In early 1999 the Youth Center’s Board of Visitors appointed an external expert to report on treatment of children at the facility.

AI hopes that it is only a matter of time before all US authorities take positive steps to ensure that human rights are truly guaranteed to all.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS SUMMIT IN PARIS, DECEMBER 1998
Sounding out the future of human rights

AI stepped back into the limelight in December 1998 at the largest concert in aid of human rights since the “Human Rights Now” tour 10 years previously. As the strains of Bob Marley’s “Get Up Stand Up” rang out across the Bercy Stadium, the crowd of 15,000 could have been forgiven for becoming a little misty-eyed. The call to “stand up for your rights”, voiced by Peter Gabriel, Tracy Chapman, Youssou N’Dour and Bruce Springsteen, came at the end of a year-long campaign to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

The eight-hour AI concert marked the end of three days of events surrounding the 10 December 1998 anniversary. More than 300 human rights defenders converged at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris, France, to attend the world’s largest human rights summit, organized in conjunction with the Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l’Homme, France Libertés and ATD Quart-Monde. Delegates from over 100 countries took part in workshops on human rights issues, testifying to the human rights violations they had witnessed and sharing valuable campaigning experiences.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, a prominent opposition leader in Myanmar, was one of the many human rights defenders who were unable to attend the summit, but she indicated her support and encouragement by way of a video message. “It is of increasing importance that such conferences be held... to remind the world that human rights is the most important issue of our time. We want these conferences to be effective ones...” She appealed, “I would like to urge [you] all... to make human rights the issue for the next 50 years.”

Concerns that Hafez Abu Sa’ada, Secretary General of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, would be unable to attend were laid aside when he was released from prison in Egypt on 6 December 1998 – just two days before the summit began - after widespread protest from international human rights organizations. He was still celebrating his release when he arrived in Paris, his shaven head a startling reminder of his recent imprisonment.

Delegates started proceedings on an activist note by passing an enthusiastic declaration calling on the United Kingdom Home Secretary to permit the request for the extradition of General Augusto Pinochet to Spain to be examined by a tribunal. Such a decision, which could allow the former Chilean dictator to stand trial for human rights crimes committed during his time in power, would send a strong message to the world against impunity.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan was present on the first evening of the summit to receive the world’s “biggest book” from AI’s Secretary General Pierre Sané. The book contained an incredible 13,111,507 signatures from those who had pledged to do everything within their power to ensure that the rights enshrined in the UDHR become a reality. “I am overwhelmed at this response”, he told those assembled at the Palais de Chaillot. “The tidal wave of the signatures tells us that for this anniversary, the people have spoken; 10 million have indeed got up, signed up, and made their mark for human rights... I hope you will keep governments on their toes in 1999 and beyond.”

But participants stressed that there was still much to be achieved if the principles contained in the UDHR were to be fully realized and if everyone was to enjoy their basic human rights.

On the final day of the summit, delegates adopted the Paris Declaration, which challenges the governments of the world to bring their actions into line with their professed commitments and looks forward to a faster pace of change in the next 50 years.

Finally, the musicians performing at the Bercy Stadium paid tribute to the spirit of the summit when they urged the audience to get involved with AI and support human rights. “With this concert,” explained Youssou N’Dour, “we want to highlight the incredible courage of the human rights defenders who struggle in dangerous conditions -- often risking their lives – to make the rights in the UDHR a reality.”

Caption: Radiohead’s front-man Thom Yorke on stage at the Bercy Stadium in Paris, France. “Without the work of organizations like AI, the UDHR would be mere rhetoric”

SOMALILAND

First visit

Professor Ghanim Al-Najjar, founder of AI in Kuwait, and AI International Secretariat staff visited the Somaliland capital of Hargeisa in October 1998. It was AI’s first visit to Somaliland, which declared unilateral independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Somali Republic but is still seeking international recognition.

The AI delegation had been invited to present a workshop on human rights awareness and action for Somaliland non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They also held talks with President Mohamed Ibrahim Egal’s government about building protection for human rights.

The three-day workshop, held in partnership with the Hargeisa office of International Cooperation for Development, drew 30 participants from the NGO community and the press, as well as representatives of the government and parliament. It tackled the issues of identifying, investigating and acting against human rights violations, and focused on human rights promotion. Throughout the workshop the memories of 21 years of massive human rights abuses under Siad Barre’s government were in everyone’s minds.

Participants, and others in Somaliland, praised the workshop for providing an invaluable opportunity for the NGO community to strengthen its work, as well as bringing together men and women from all communities, including minorities, working to create a better future for human rights in the country.

AI delegates met former prisoners of conscience, on whose behalf the organization had campaigned in the 1980s, and visited mass graves of hundreds of people extrajudicially executed in 1988. They inquired into human rights issues currently affecting government critics and members of the new independent press.

During a visit to Hargeisa Central Prison, AI delegates spoke to Ahmed Farah Jirreh, a businessman who was detained by a “regional security committee” and sentenced to one year’s imprisonment without any form of trial. He was freed shortly after the visit and after AI had reiterated appeals for his release.

In meetings with President Egal and government officials AI delegates stressed the importance of building human rights institutions, and urged special attention be paid to the independence of the judiciary and human rights training for the police. Finally, President Egal, a former prisoner of conscience under Siad Barre’s government, and his cabinet pledged to make human rights a reality

in Somaliland when they signed up to AI's campaign marking the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Caption: President Egal shakes hands with Professor Ghanim Al-Najjar of AI Kuwait after pledging to make human rights a reality in Somaliland

BHUTAN

Hopes fuelled for human rights

Bhutan, a small Buddhist kingdom, is undergoing an important transition. Development policies have delivered Bhutan's people near-universal primary education, free healthcare and a high level of environmental protection. An ongoing process of political decentralization recently culminated in King Jigme Singye Wangchuk devolving executive power to a council of ministers elected by the National Assembly. Bhutan's rich cultural traditions have been preserved, although not without abuses against the Nepali-speaking minority, many of whom were forced into exile in the early 1990s. Prison conditions have been improved and some political prisoners have been freed under amnesties.

With development and openness have come renewed calls from within Bhutanese society for greater democracy and respect for human rights. In late 1998 an AI delegation visited Bhutan for the first time in six years. The visit provided a unique opportunity to encourage the government to respond with further liberalization and strengthened legal safeguards, including the incorporation of human rights provisions into Bhutan's evolving constitutional framework.

AI delegates met King Wangchuk and Jigme Thinley, Chairman of the Council of Ministers and Minister of Foreign Affairs. They also interviewed several prisoners of concern to AI, including Tek Nath Rizal, a prisoner of conscience who is serving a life sentence at Chemgang detention centre.

The delegation went on to visit the eastern districts of Mongar and Tashigang, where arrests and torture were reported in October 1997 in the aftermath of pro-democracy demonstrations. In the south, delegates gathered information about the activities of armed opposition groups, including the United Liberation Front of Assam and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, which have set up camps in southern Bhutan for operations across the border in northeastern India. AI urged the government to ensure that the protection of civilian life is paramount in its response to this security threat.

AI also expressed hope that Bhutan and Nepal would generate new momentum in the bilateral talks on the fate of more than 90,000 mostly Nepali-speaking people from southern Bhutan in refugee camps in Nepal. The delegation urged that issues such as resettlement should not be allowed to further complicate the bilateral process in identifying who among the people in the refugee camps has the right to Bhutanese citizenship and to return to Bhutan.

Caption: AI delegates meet members of the National Women's Association of Bhutan at their office in Thimphu, 1998

CHILE/ UNITED KINGDOM

An historic chance for justice

At the time of writing, the House of Lords in the United Kingdom had embarked on a second hearing to determine whether former General Augusto Pinochet, head of the military government of Chile between 1973 and 1990, has immunity from prosecution for crimes against humanity. If the Lords rule that General Pinochet does not have immunity, then legal proceedings will seek to secure his extradition to Spain. A ruling in favour of the immunity of General Pinochet would fly in the face of international human rights law and standards.

The Chilean government itself has acknowledged that under General Pinochet's rule more than 3,000 people died under torture, "disappeared" or were victims of extrajudicial execution at the hands of government forces. Even this is a conservative figure. Many thousands survived the systematic torture or were arbitrarily detained or exiled. General Pinochet was fully aware of these human rights violations, and was in full command of the work of the agencies responsible. In February 1998 the former head of the intelligence services (DINA), Manuel Contreras, stated before the Chilean Supreme Court that General Pinochet had overall command of DINA operations.

General Pinochet's government also set in place a number of mechanisms to guarantee the impunity of human rights violators. As a result, there is virtually no accountability for human rights violations committed under the military government; the families of the victims, having failed to secure justice in Chile, have played an important role in initiating judicial investigations at the international level.

All states are obliged under international law to prosecute and punish crimes against humanity, no matter when or where they occurred, or who committed them -- there is no such thing as "diplomatic immunity" from such crimes. It is essential that the UK authorities should adhere to their obligation to permit legal proceedings against Augusto Pinochet so that his guilt or innocence can be determined by a court of law. The world's governments must also send out the clear signal that there can be no immunity for those accused of the worst crimes in the world.

For the past 25 years, the relatives of those killed and "disappeared" in Chile have campaigned for justice. They need the truth to come to terms with what happened to their loved ones. The human rights violations under General Pinochet are not an issue of the past -- they are an issue of the present, and of the future.

For more details about the Pinochet case, see future editions of AI News or contact the AI office in your country.

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TURKEY

A frank exchange of views

The first human rights conference to bring the government together with Turkey's human rights community took place in Istanbul in November 1998. It may mark the beginning of a more cooperative and positive approach to the promotion and protection of human rights in Turkey.

The conference, organized jointly by AI and the Istanbul Bar Association, aimed to identify solutions to Turkey's deep-rooted human rights problems and to develop, if possible, a shared

view on the priorities for action. Discussions addressed Turkey's most pressing concerns, including torture, "disappearances", restrictions on freedom of expression, unfair trials and the provision of better human rights training.

Two hundred people participated in "Human Rights in Turkey: the Way Forward", including delegates from non-governmental organizations and governmental, legal and civil institutions in Turkey. International organizations were also represented, including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the UN, the Council of Europe and the European Parliament. Speakers included Dr Hikmet Sami Türk, Minister of State responsible for Human Rights, and Akøn Birdal, President of the Human Rights Association (see Worldwide Appeals in this issue).

Outside the conference, a political storm was growing following the arrest in Italy of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK). So tense did the situation become that the mothers of the "disappeared", fearful of attacks by ultranationalists, appealed for support at their weekly Saturday vigil. AI representatives and others attending the conference responded, joining the mothers at their demonstration in the city centre. In a moving intervention, Emine Ocak, one of the founders of the "Saturday Mothers", later presented flowers to the conference in thanks.

The hoped-for common view of the problems and solutions remained elusive, but the conference was judged a success by participants. Most importantly, it highlighted the need for future dialogue.

Caption: Dr Hikmet Sami Türk, Minister of State for Human Rights, speaks to the press in front of AI's conference banner