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Iran: urgent investigation required into security forces violence against Sufi Muslims in Qom

Amnesty International is calling on the Iranian authorities to order an immediate, independent investigation into the violent suppression of an apparently peaceful demonstration by Nematollahi Sufi Muslims in Qom on 13 February, 2005. Hundreds of demonstrators, including women and children, were injured when police, and the Hojatieh and Fatemiyon groups (organized pro-government groups), broke up the protest, apparently using excessive force, and as many as 1200 are believed to have been arrested. Most have now been released, but some 200 of those detained are still being held. Amnesty International is 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.

The Nematollahi Sufi, who are also known as dervishes or mystics, are Shi'a Muslims, who emphasise the spirituality of their faith. They had gathered to protest against an order, issued a few days earlier, to evacuate their place of worship— known as a Hosseiniye - in the city of Qom, by February 11. The Hosseiniye is located next to the home of the Sufi group's principal preacher in Qom and was built three years ago, apparently legally and with the permission of the municipal authorities.

The Sufi are reported to have begun their protest on 9 February, with some members inside the place of worship, and others stationed outside, and they held a mourning and prayer ceremony on 10 February, the day of the Shi'a Muslim festival of Ashoura. This was peaceful but the number of protestors swelled as hundreds of Nematollahi Sufis travelled from other parts of the country to attend. The demonstrators included many woman and children offering white flowers and cake to local residents.

Security forces, including anti-riot police, took up positions around the centre, and at around 3:00 pm on 13 February set a deadline for the Sufi to evacuate it. Members of the Fatemiyon and Hojatieh groups, also reportedly surrounded the centre, 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 Sufi 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 4:00 pm, supported by the Hojatieh and Fatemiyon groups, attacked the protestors outside the centre and stormed the building, using tear gas and explosives. They beat many protestors, some so badly that they required hospital treatment and, according to some reports, set light to the centre - eyewitnesses later described the Qom sky as polluted with tear gas, smoke and fire. Some 1200 protestors are reported to have been detained and taken away on buses to unknown locations.

With the Sufi place of worship cleared of protestors, the security forces moved in bulldozers and trucks in

the early hours of 14 February and demolished the building and neighbouring houses, including the home of the main Sufi preacher.

Most of those arrested are reported to have been released, though they are said to have been required to sign papers agreeing that they will not attend any Sufi gatherings in Qom as a condition of their release. Some are reported to have been bussed to a sports stadium for interrogation, including some with serious injuries, and tortured or ill-treated. Families of these who remain detained – said to number about 200 – reportedly have been unable to obtain information about their whereabouts, legal status, health or conditions.

On 15 February, Qom Governor Abbas Mohtaj confirmed to Jomhuri-ye Eslami newspaper that 1,000 people had been arrested and 200 injured but he accused the Sufi 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) links to foreign countries are evident.” Another Qom official acknowledged that police had used tear gas but claimed this was necessary to disperse the gathering and that some of the protestors were armed with knives and stones. The same official said that the Sufi’s Hosseiniye was demolished because it had been turned illegally from a residential building to a centre of worship.

Amnesty International is urging the Iranian authorities to initiate an urgent, impartial and independent investigation into the actions taken by security forces and paramilitaries against the Nematollahi Sufi in Qom, and to ensure that any officials or members of paramilitary groups responsible for violating human rights are held to account and brought to justice promptly and fairly. The organization is also calling on the Iranian authorities to ensure that police are fully trained in and at all times comply with international standards governing policing activities, including the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and the Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, which requires that “Law enforcement officials, in carrying out their duty, shall, as far as possible, apply non-violent means before resorting to the use of force and firearms. They may use force and firearms only if other means remain ineffective or without any promise of achieving the intended result.” Law enforcement officials should receive adequate training on fundamental human rights, in particular those protecting the rights to life and to physical and mental integrity of all individuals, among other rights.

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, 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 Jomhuri-ye Eslami newspaper and the Kayhan newspaper, warning of their popularity, and people’s tendency to follow them.