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Iran: Need for restraint as anniversary of unrest in Khuzestan approaches

As the first anniversary of serious unrest among the Arab population of Khuzestan province approaches on 15 April, Amnesty International is calling on the Iranian authorities to exercise restraint in the policing of any demonstrations which may take place and to take urgent measures to address the serious human rights violations committed by Iranian security forces against members of the country's Arab minority during the past year.

Much of Iran's Arab minority lives in Khuzestan province (known as Ahwaz by the Arab community). This adjoins Iraq and is the source of much of Iran's oil wealth. Yet, the Arab community has long claimed that it has been discriminated against by successive governments, receiving less than their fair share of state resources and subject to widespread land expropriation by the Iranian authorities. Such land expropriation, it is alleged, is part of a government policy which aims to dispossess Arabs of their traditional lands and forcibly relocate them to other areas in order to facilitate the movement of non-Arab Iranians into Khuzestan. Frustration and economic deprivation has spilled over in the past year into a cycle of violent protest and repression which seems likely to continue unless the Iranian authorities take the measures necessary to address the social, economic and other grievances that gave rise to the unrest.¹

Mass protests by Iranian Arabs broke out on 15 April 2005 and continued over the following days after the disclosure of a letter allegedly written in 1999 by a presidential adviser which set out policies for the reduction of the Arab population of Khuzestan. The alleged author of the letter denied its validity, but its contents -- which included proposals for resettling Arabs in other regions of Iran and resettling non-Arabs in Khuzestan, and replacing Arabic with Persian place names² -- provoked outrage. Scores of Iranian Arabs were killed, hundreds were injured and hundreds more detained when security forces dispersed protest demonstrations on 15 April and in the following days. According to reports, Iranian security forces used excessive force and were responsible for unlawful killings and possible extra-judicial executions. Subsequently, the government in Tehran and Iran's parliament, the *Majles*, mounted a limited inquiry into the unrest though its outcome is not known to Amnesty International.

The cycle of violence has continued and intensified during the past year. Scores of people were arrested following four pre-election bomb blasts in June 2005 in Ahvaz city and two others in Tehran; as many as 10 people were reportedly killed and at least 90 others injured by the explosions. In September and October 2005, armed attacks were carried out against important oil installations in Khuzestan and further bomb explosions in October 2005 and January 2006 caused at least 12 deaths and injuries to hundreds of people. The Iranian authorities accused the United Kingdom (UK) government of involvement in the blasts, but this was denied by the UK. Amnesty International condemns the bomb attacks and other attacks on civilians.

Waves of arrests were made in the wake of the explosions and at least eight Arabs have been executed for alleged involvement. They include Mehdi Nawaseri and Ali Afrawi, who were executed in public on 2 March 2006 after they were shown on Iranian television confessing to involvement in the October bombings. They were reportedly tried *in camera* without access to lawyers before Revolutionary Courts whose procedures fall short of international standards for fair trial. Others have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms after unfair trials.

Other Iranian Arabs have been arrested during cultural gatherings or demonstrations that reportedly were peaceful until the Iranian authorities used force to disperse them. For example, at the beginning of November 2005, at least 81 people were arrested during the week preceding the end of Ramadan, '*Id al-Fitr*, while attending an Arab cultural gathering called *Mahabis*, which traditionally takes place during the *iftar* (breaking of the fast). On 4 November 2005, '*Id al-Fitr*, several hundred Iranian Arab demonstrators began marching towards the centre of Ahvaz city, possibly in protest at the earlier arrests, where they were met by the security forces, who reportedly fired tear gas grenades into the crowd causing two youths to fall into the Karoun River and drown, apparently under the effects of the tear gas which caused temporary paralysis. Further clashes between Iranian Arabs and the security forces on 11 and 12 January 2006 in Khuzestan following an initially peaceful demonstration on '*Id al-Adha*, the Muslim Feast of Sacrifice, reportedly resulted in three men being killed by the security forces and some 40 other people being injured. The demonstrators were reportedly demanding an end to Arab persecution, poverty and unemployment, and the release of political prisoners detained since April 2005.

Amnesty International has received the names of at least 448 Iranian Arabs who are reported to have been arrested since April 2005, but believes the true figure may be higher. Many of those named have since been released; some have been detained more than once. Some detainees are reported to have been tortured or ill-treated, including Zahra Nasser-Torfi, director of the Ahwaz al-Amjad Cultural Centre in Ahwaz city. She was severely beaten, threatened with execution and threatened with rape after she was detained at the time of the *Mahabis* arrests in November 2005. Hajj Salem Bawi, an Arab tribal leader and businessman who was detained in August 2005 with his five sons, a nephew and two other members of his extended family, reported after his release that he had seen three of his sons in Ahvaz city's Amaniya prison who had been tortured or ill-treated. Two of his sons, Hani and Moslem, have been sentenced to prison terms and at least one, Zamel, has been sentenced to death.

Iranian Arab women and children have also been detained apparently as hostages to force their male relatives to surrender to the Iranian authorities. For example, Ma'soumeh Ka'bi was detained together with her four-year-old son, Imad, in the early hours of 27 February 2006 apparently to put pressure on her husband, political activist Habib Nabgan, to give himself up to the authorities. He has fled the country and taken refuge abroad but has received threats that his family will be tortured or killed if he does not return to Iran. In another case, Sakina Naisi, a pregnant mother of five, was reportedly arrested in Ahvaz on 27 February 2006 because her husband, political activist Ahmad Naisi, is sought by the authorities, and the family home in the Sho'aybiyeh district of Ahvaz was demolished by the authorities with bulldozers. Sakina Naisi reportedly had to undergo an abortion in early April 2006 because of injuries she sustained. Further, Soghra Khudayrawi and her four-year-old son, Zeidan, were reportedly arrested in Ahvaz on 7 March 2006 because her husband, Khalaf Derhab Khudayrawi, is wanted by the authorities on account of his political activities. Hoda Hawashemi was reportedly arrested at her home in Ahvaz on 1 April 2006, together with her two sons -Ossama, aged two, and four-year-old Ahmed -- because her husband, Habib Farajallah Chaab, is a leading activist wanted by the authorities. Her present whereabouts and those of her two young children are unknown.

Amnesty International is calling on the Iranian authorities to:

- Release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally;
- Review law and practice to ensure that no one is imprisoned as a prisoner of conscience or discriminated against solely on account of their political opinions, race, ethnicity, gender, or language;
- Review as a matter of urgency, through an independent judicial body, the cases of all political prisoners held without trial or convicted after unfair trials, and order the immediate release of all of those against

whom there is no evidence that they have committed a recognizably criminal offence;
Grant all such prisoners prompt and regular access to lawyers of their own choosing and their families and to appropriate medical care if necessary;
Ensure that all trials, including in capital cases, respect, as a minimum standard, the relevant provisions of the ICCPR;
Investigate all allegations of torture or ill-treatment promptly and thoroughly. The methods and findings of any such investigation should be made public. Anyone implicated in human rights violations should be brought to justice promptly and fairly and victims of torture and ill-treatment should be granted compensation;
Take effective measures to eradicate the use of torture, including the full implementation in practice of Iran's own legislation and the ratification of the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and complying with its provisions;
Demonstrate its respect for the inherent right to life by ordering a moratorium on executions;
Investigate all possible unlawful killings or extra-judicial executions promptly and fairly in accordance with the UN Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extralegal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions, and bring to justice, fairly and promptly, any members of the security forces responsible for unlawful killings or other grave violations of human rights.
End any policy of deliberate, discriminatory land expropriation or population transfer aimed at dispossessing minority populations from their traditional lands;
Cease any practice of forced evictions: that is evicting people from land or housing without consultation, due process of law, and assurances of adequate alternative accommodation;
Cease forced internal displacement linked to forced evictions and "land grabbing";
Take immediate steps towards the elimination of *de facto* discrimination in the exercise of economic, social and cultural rights such as the rights to education, adequate housing, water and sanitation as well as in access to utilities such as electricity adopting special measures, such as multilingual education, as necessary.

¹For further information about Amnesty International's concerns about the Arab and other minorities in Iran, please see *Iran: New government fails to address dire human rights situation* (AI Index: MDE 13/010/2006) <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde130102006>

²The text, with an English translation, can be found at <http://www.ahwaz.org.uk/images/ahwaz-khuzestan.pdf>; the supposed author's denial that he wrote the letter, along with an explanation of the contents, can be found (in Persian) at <http://www.webneveshteha.com/>.