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Iran: End human rights violations against Iran's Ahwazi Arab minority

President Rouhani's first official visit to Khuzestan province must signal a clear policy shift in Iran's treatment of ethnic and religious minorities rather than be a mere measure of appeasement while human rights violations against the Ahwazi Arabs and other minorities in Iran continue unabated, warned Amnesty International.

The organization welcomes President Rouhani's speech in Khuzestan on 15 January 2014 in which he stated that discrimination against ethnic communities must not be tolerated. The organization, however, remains gravely concerned that despite constitutional guarantees of equality, members of religious and ethnic minorities, including Arabs, are subject to discriminatory laws and practices such as undue restrictions on social, cultural, linguistic and religious rights. For instance, minority communities often have restricted access to economic, social and cultural rights such as housing, water and sanitation, and face measures such as land and property confiscation and denial of state and para-statal employment under discriminatory selection criteria.

Amnesty International has documented numerous cases of arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and other ill-treatment, grossly unfair trials of political prisoners, and use of the death penalty which disproportionately affects minorities, as well as restrictions on movement experienced by members of the Ahwazi Arab minority.

Iranian authorities have become increasingly suspicious of Ahwazi Arabs following the unrest that broke out in 2005 in the province of Khuzestan in protest at an alleged plan by the government to disperse the Arab population or to force them to relinquish their Arab identity. In 2011, the authorities arrested and detained scores, if not hundreds, of Ahwazi Arabs in relation to the demonstrations organized to mark the sixth anniversary of the 2005 protests. Many of those arrested were allegedly tortured or otherwise ill-treated and subsequently sentenced in unfair trials.

Of particular concern to Amnesty International are the cases of death row prisoners, **Hadi Rashedi, Hashem Sha'bani Amouri, Mohammad Ali Amouri, Sayed Jaber Alboshoka** and his brother **Sayed Mokhtar Alboshoka**, all members of the Ahwazi Arab minority. All five men were arrested at their homes in early 2011, ahead of the sixth anniversary of the 2005 protests, apparently in connection with their cultural activities, such as organizing events in the Arabic language, conferences, educational courses, art classes, and poetry recital gatherings. They were sentenced to death on 7 July 2012 by a Revolutionary Court, after being convicted of charges including "enmity against God", "corruption on earth", "gathering and colluding against state security" and "spreading propaganda against the system". Prior to their trial, Hadi Rashedi and Hashem Sha'bani Amouri were shown "confessing" on a state television channel, in violation of international standards for fair trial. Their death sentences were upheld by the Supreme Court in January 2013.

On 7 December 2013, Hadi Rashedi and Hashem Sha'bani Amouri were transferred to an unknown location from Karoun Prison in Ahvaz, Khuzestan province. Amnesty International understands that the family members of both men have been receiving conflicting information on

their whereabouts and who is holding them from officials at the Ministry of Intelligence, the Revolutionary Court of Ahvaz and Karoun Prison.

Fears have grown regarding the fate of both men given reports of secret executions of other members of the Ahwazi Arab community. In November or December 2013, Ghazi Abbasi, Abdul-Reza Amir-Khanafereh, Abdul-Amir Mojaddami and Jasim Moghaddam Payam were executed following their transfer from Karoun Prison to an unknown location on 3 November. The families of the men were reportedly not told the exact date of the executions, either in advance or after they had taken place, and have not received the bodies of their relatives. Another four Ahwazi Arab men, Abd al-Rahman Heidarian, Taha Heidarian, Jamshid Heidarian, and Ali Sharifi were also executed in secret in June 2012 after being transferred to an unknown location. The families of the men have yet to be notified of their burial place.

The authorities' failure to inform the families of prisoners of their fate and whereabouts and their refusal to hand over the bodies of those executed, or inform them where the body is buried and allow them reasonable access to that location, is in breach of their international obligations.

According to the UN Human Rights Committee "persisting uncertainty of the circumstances that led to [an] execution, as well as the location of [the] grave...the complete secrecy surrounding the date of the execution and the place of burial, as well as the refusal to hand over the body for burial... have the effect of intimidating or punishing the family by intentionally leaving it in a state of uncertainty and mental distress."¹ The Committee viewed such treatment as inhuman treatment of the family members in violation of Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

As immediate measures, Amnesty International is urging Iran's authorities to reveal the whereabouts of Hadi Rashedi and Hashem Sha'bani Amouri, not execute any of the five men and order retrials for all of the men, in proceedings in line with international fair trial standards and without recourse to the death penalty. The Iranian authorities must also take prompt action to address the deeply rooted discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities by amending all laws that discriminate on any grounds and eradicating all discriminatory measures.

Background

Much of the Arab community in Iran, which is believed to constitute between 3 and 8 per cent of the total population, lives in the oil-producing Khuzestan province in southern Iran (known as Ahwaz by the Arab community) which adjoins Iraq. Ahwazi Arabs often state that they are marginalized and discriminated against in access to education, employment, adequate housing, political participation and cultural rights. Some Ahwazi Arabs – who are mostly Shi'a Muslims like the majority of people in Iran – have formed groups calling for a separate Arab state in the area.

Under international law, Iran must uphold the rights of ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities living within its jurisdiction and provide for the members of such minorities to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language. In September 2010, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, urged Iran to "take the necessary steps to achieve effective protection from discrimination against, inter alia, Arab, Azeri, Balochi and Kurdish communities and some communities of non-citizens ... in various domains, in particular, employment, housing, health, education and freedom of expression and religion"².

¹ Case No. 2120/2011, *Vladislav Kovalev et al. v. Belarus*, views adopted on 29 October 2012, UN document CCPR/C/106/D/2120/2011, para. 11.10.

² Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, adopted on 27 August 2010, UN document CERD/C/IRN/CO/18-19, para. 15.

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