Joint call for states to mandate a UN-led inquiry into the serious human rights violations, including enforced disappearances, torture and unlawful killings during and in the aftermath of the November 2019 protests in Iran, on the occasion of the 45th session of the HRC

We, the undersigned human rights organizations, call on your government to address the continuing crisis of impunity for serious human rights violations committed by the Iranian authorities during the November 2019 protests and their aftermath, including through collective action at the 45th session of the UN Human Rights Council.

In November 2019, nationwide anti-establishment protests in Iran, triggered by a significant rise in the price of petrol, were met with a brutal campaign of mass repression by the Iranian authorities. Security forces used unlawful force, including live ammunition, birdshot, metal pellets, tear gas and water cannons against unarmed protesters and bystanders, killing hundreds and arresting thousands, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).1 These gross violations of human rights took place under the cover of an unprecedented week-long Internet shutdown imposed by the Iranian authorities.

The intentional use of lethal force by security forces during the protests resulted in the unlawful killing of hundreds of protesters and bystanders, including children, who posed no imminent threat to life or serious injury. Amnesty International has found that the security forces killed more than 300 people, including 23 children – 22 boys, aged between 12 and 17, and a girl reportedly aged between eight and 12.2 Most of the victims were shot in the head or torso, indicating that security forces were shooting to kill.3

The authorities also arrested more than 7,000 men, women and children as young as 10. Many detainees were subjected to incommunicado detention and enforced disappearance while held in undisclosed locations. According to Amnesty International, police, intelligence and security forces and some prison officials used widespread torture and other ill-treatment against detainees. These

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included the most frequently reported methods of physical torture such as beatings, floggings, suspension, and forcing detainees into stress positions for prolonged periods, as well as information on torture methods such as electric shocks, waterboarding, mock executions, and sexual violence and humiliation. Detainees were systematically denied access to a lawyer at the investigation stage of their case and many were forced to make “confessions” under torture and other ill-treatment, which were unlawfully used as evidence by courts. Some continued to be denied access to legal representation at their trials. Hundreds have been prosecuted on overly broad and vague charges in trials that failed to meet international fair trial standards. Many have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms and flogging and at least three protesters have been sentenced to death. Two human rights defenders have had their flogging sentences carried out.

We are seriously concerned about the situation of individuals who are subjected to ongoing enforced disappearance, are arbitrarily detained or are facing unfair trials that could lead to lengthy prison terms, flogging and/or execution in connection with their participation in the protests.

Despite the UN High Commissioner’s call for “prompt, independent and impartial investigations into all violations that have taken place” and a similar call from ten UN Special Procedures, the Iranian authorities have failed to open investigations into allegations of crimes under international law and other serious human rights violations committed by police, security and intelligence agents and prison officials, with the complicity of Iran’s judiciary, and to take any steps to hold those responsible to account. Instead, high level officials have made statements praising security and intelligence bodies and the authorities have embarked on a campaign of mass repression and harassment to intimidate and silence victims and families of victims seeking truth, justice and redress.

In a report released last week, the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran has expressed his deep concern that “the Government’s denial of responsibility is exacerbated by a lack of transparent, independent and prompt investigations into the events”. He also stressed that “the Government’s obstruction of a proper investigation [is further established by] concerning reports that the families of victims are being harassed and threatened for having publicly demanded justice for their relatives’ deaths”.

As attention has been shifting to other issues in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe it is important that this issue does not slip away from the Council’s attention. The succession of atrocities in Iran is inextricably linked to the impunity that has led the authorities to believe that they can commit crimes under international law and other serious human rights violations without repercussions either domestically or from the international community. Therefore, promoting accountability is more essential than ever, not only to support victims and their families who are anguished at the lack of justice, truth and reparation, but also to provide a vital safeguard against the recurrence of such violations in the future.

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7 UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Report to the UN General Assembly, A/75/213, 21 July 2020 (para. 9), accessible at: https://undocs.org/A/75/213
8 UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Report to the UN General Assembly, A/75/213, 21 July 2020 (para. 13), accessible at: https://undocs.org/A/75/213
We therefore renew our call for the UN Human Rights Council to establish a UN-led inquiry into the widespread and systematic crimes and serious human rights violations committed by the Iranian authorities during and in the aftermath of the November 2019 protests.9

We urge your government to take the opportunity of the 45th session of the Human Rights Council to support the establishment of such an inquiry and deliver a clear and resounding message for the need for accountability in this context and to avoid repetition of such crimes under international law and other serious human rights violations.

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AHRAZ - Association for the Human Rights of the Azerbaijani people in Iran
All Human Rights for All in Iran
Amnesty International
Arseh Sevom
ARTICLE 19
Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
Center for Human Rights in Iran
Centre for Supporters of Human Rights
ECPM – Together against the Death Penalty
FIDH – International Federation for Human Rights
Human Rights Watch
HRAI – Human Rights Activists in Iran
Impact Iran
Iran Human Rights
Iran Human Rights Documentation Center
Justice for Iran
Kurdistan Human Rights - Geneva (KMMK-G)
OutRight Action International
Siamak Pourzand Foundation
Small Media
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