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Iran: Ensure right to safe drinking water and release peaceful protesters in Khuzestan

Iranian authorities must carry out an impartial and thorough investigation into reports that security forces used unnecessary and excessive force, possibly including firearms, against generally peaceful protesters during recent protests in Khuzestan province, where people have been demanding clean and safe drinking water, Amnesty International said today. They should ensure that all detainees are protected from torture and other ill-treatment and that any held solely for peacefully exercising their right to assembly are released.

Iranian authorities should also ensure that people in Khuzestan and other provinces across Iran enjoy their right to access sufficient amounts of safe drinking water for personal and domestic uses, that is, water for drinking, personal sanitation, washing of clothes, food preparation, and personal and household hygiene, and that those who wish to join peaceful protests to demand this right are neither obstructed nor penalized for doing so.

Protests over water shortages and water quality

From 29 June to 1 July, thousands of people in Khorramshahr, Abadan, and other cities in Khuzestan province, populated mostly by Iran's Ahwazi Arab minority, took to the streets to protest that salty and muddy water rather than clean drinking water was coming out of their taps, as temperatures soared to over 50°C in the region.

According to state media reports, on 29 June, a 20-hour water outage in Ramhormoz county forced residents to drink untreated water, leading to around 350 people contracting intestinal infections. On the same day, a public outcry over Khuzestan's protracted water crisis peaked following a separate water outage caused by broken water pipelines in Hoveyzeh county days earlier, which impacted people in Khorramshahr and Abadan, two cities served by the pipeline, and the authorities' statements that the water outage could continue for another 10 to 15 days. Domestic media outlets reported that the hardness of water in Khorramshahr and Abadan reached six times the permissible limit, making drinking water in these cities unusable.

On 20 June, the member of parliament for Abadan, Gholamreza Sharafi, had said, "The water in Abadan is not even usable for washing, sanitation and personal hygiene; it is so salty that when using it to wash the face, it causes the eyes to burn."

Use of unnecessary and excessive force

On 29 June, protesters in Khorramshahr marched to the venue used for weekly Friday prayers, carrying empty plastic water containers and chanting Persian and Arabic slogans such as "Khorramshahr has no water". They vented their frustrations at the authorities, including the governor of Khorramshahr, by chanting "They [the Iranian authorities] have plundered us in the name of religion" and "We don't want an incompetent governor".

The protests continued the following day, when protesters could be heard chanting now familiar anti-establishment slogans that went beyond socio-economic grievances and voiced opposition against political authoritarianism and Iran's Supreme Leader. As seen in videos shared on social media and Persian media outlets abroad and reviewed by Amnesty International, riot police and other security forces used tear gas to disperse the demonstrators, the majority of whom were protesting peacefully, and, in so doing, also affected bystanders, including women holding infants. The videos show a small number of protesters throwing stones towards the security forces. They also show objects on fire. One video shows a plain-clothed man carrying what appears to be a Kalashnikov-style rifle but it is unclear whether he is a plain-clothed member of the security forces or an armed protester.

The demonstrations spread to neighbouring towns on 30 June and 1 July, with hundreds of people in cities across

Khuzestan province, including Ahvaz and Abadan, taking part in demonstrations against water shortages in their own areas and in solidarity with protesters in Khorramshahr.

The distinctive sound of gunfire can be heard in videos of the demonstration in Khorramshahr on 30 June. When questioned during a press conference the following day, Iran's Interior Minister, Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli, confirmed that there had indeed been gunfire and that one person had been taken to hospital with a gunshot wound as a result. However, he did not disclose any information about either the person or group responsible for firing the shots or the injured individual.

Reports by Persian-language media outside Iran have indicated that the number of protesters injured in the demonstration in Khorramshahr on 30 June was higher than that disclosed by the authorities. There have also been reports of one protester being killed, but the Interior Minister has strongly denied this. He has also stated that 10 members of the security forces were injured during the protest.

In any instance where police and other security forces decide it is necessary to use force to contain violence by protesters, they must distinguish between individuals who are engaged in violence and those who are not, and carefully aim proportionate force only at those engaged in violence. Violence by a few individuals must not be met by a response which treats the entire assembly as violent, and in any decision whether to resort to the use of force, law enforcement agencies must carefully consider the risks of escalating an already tense situation. Tear gas by its very nature has a high probability of affecting not only those individuals who are engaged in violence, but also bystanders and peaceful demonstrators. It may therefore only be used for dispersal if violence has reached such a level that security forces cannot contain the threat by means which can directly affect the violent individuals only.

Under international law, security forces must not use firearms except to defend themselves or others against an imminent threat of death or serious injury, and only when less extreme means are insufficient to achieve these objectives. Firearms must never be used as a public order management tool for dispersing protesters.

Amnesty International calls on the Iranian authorities to ensure that there is an impartial and effective investigation into the use of force by the security forces in the demonstrations in Khorramshahr on 30 June, with a view to establishing responsibilities and accountability of the officers involved, including at various levels of the command structure in charge during those events.

Arrests

According to the judiciary's news agency, Mizan Online News Agency, the authorities have identified 35 people who they said "instigated the riots and exploited the grievances of protesters" and have arrested 10 of these individuals in connection with the protests in Khorramshahr and Abadan. The authorities said that one of the detainees was the administrator of three Telegram channels that were "inciting terrorist acts and [promoting] separatist tendencies".

According to Human Rights Activists News Agency, an independent human rights group, dozens of people have been arrested in Khorramshahr, Abadan, and Ahvaz in connection with the protests, though at least seven individuals from Ahvaz are reported to have since been released.

Amnesty International is concerned that those detained may be at risk of torture and other ill-treatment, given long-standing concerns about such human rights violations in Iran's detention facilities.

Amnesty International calls on the Iranian authorities to ensure that all detainees are protected from torture and other ill-treatment and that anyone held solely for peacefully exercising their right to assembly is released.

Iran's water crisis

Iran has experienced serious water problems for years, depriving people frequently of their human right to have adequate access to clean and safe water. The main [drivers](#) of the problems have been recognized by environmental experts as rapid population growth; an inefficient agricultural sector; discharge of domestic, agricultural and industrial wastewater into urban water sources; aggressive dam building and groundwater pumping; and mismanagement by the authorities. These, along with frequent droughts and rising water demands, have escalated

the situation to a critical level marked by the drying up of lakes and rivers, declining groundwater levels, frequent dust storms, desertification and degradation of water quality.

Khuzestan is one of the provinces that has been particularly affected by Iran's water crisis. Despite its huge oil resources, the region and its people have faced years of poverty, pollution, water shortage and increased salinity of municipal water. Much of this, according to minority rights activists, is the result of decades of neglect and discrimination by the authorities. Critics have said that the authorities have failed to allocate adequate financial resources and take other necessary steps to ensure that all the people of Khuzestan are able to enjoy freely their right to clean and safe water. Consequently, there have been numerous protests in recent years across Khuzestan province over the lack of safe available drinking water.

International standards on the right to water

Clean, safe water is crucial for human survival and health, and this is reflected in international human rights law, where access to adequate clean and safe drinking water is a key right. As a state party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Iran is obligated to ensure that all people have access to water. General Comment No. 15 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states: "The human right to water is indispensable for leading a life in human dignity. It is a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights... This human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic uses."

The authorities in Iran should ensure the realization of the right to water in a way that is sustainable, ensuring that the right can be realized for present and future generations. General Comment No. 15 states: "The right to water, like any human right, imposes three types of obligations on States parties: obligations to respect, obligations to protect and obligations to fulfil... States parties should adopt comprehensive and integrated strategies and programmes to ensure that there is sufficient and safe water for present and future generations..." It also states: "Water and water facilities and services have to be accessible to everyone without discrimination... States parties should give special attention to those individuals and groups who have traditionally faced difficulties in exercising this right, including women, children, minority groups... In particular, States parties should take steps to ensure that... Rural and deprived urban areas have access to properly maintained water facilities. Access to traditional water sources in rural areas should be protected from unlawful encroachment and pollution."

In her 2013 report, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation stated, "Human rights standards demand that States invest the 'maximum available resources' in water and sanitation sectors. They also require the use of resources in ways that have the greatest possible impact on achieving universal realization of these rights, by prioritizing essential levels of access to the most marginalized. In times of prosperity, spending on water and sanitation has to include planning, independent monitoring, establishment of accountability mechanisms, and operation and maintenance, so as to enable the progressive realization of the rights even during times of crisis, hence preventing slippages and retrogression."