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IRAN

@Executions of prisoners continue unabated

INTRODUCTION

Many thousands of prisoners have been executed in Iran since the proclamation of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Between July 1988 and January 1989 alone Amnesty International recorded more than 2,500 political prisoners who were executed, including prisoners of conscience. In 1992 executions have continued to take place after secret summary trials. In June 1992, for example, at least four people were executed in Mashhad within two weeks of their arrest following riots and demonstrations. Reports of individuals being executed because of their religious background continue to reach Amnesty International. Most executions have been carried out by hanging, often in public, but victims have been stoned to death, beheaded, or subjected to a combination of punishments, including flogging and amputation, before being put to death.

EXECUTION OF POLITICAL PRISONERS

Thousands of political prisoners, including many prisoners of conscience, have been executed in Iran after unfair trials. Trials in political cases continue to fall far short of internationally recognized standards for fair trial. Trial hearings are usually held in camera, inside prisons; proceedings are summary, hearings often last only a few minutes, with defendants having no access to lawyers, no right to call witnesses in their defence and no right to appeal¹.

July 1988 marked the beginning of the most recent mass killing of political prisoners in Iran. Amnesty International has recorded the names of 2,500 political detainees who were executed in the second half of 1988 and believes the real total to be much higher. Details of the mass killing emerged only after the event. The mass executions followed Iran's acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 598 calling for a ceasefire in the Gulf War between Iran and Iraq, and a few days later, the armed incursion by the Iraq-based opposition group, the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), into western Iran, which was repulsed by the Iranian army. President Ali Khamenei spoke in December 1988 of the decision taken by the government to execute "those who have links from inside prison with hypocrites [PMOI] who mounted an armed attack inside the territory of the Islamic Republic", but a large number of those executed either had no links with the PMOI, or had already been in prison for some years.

Before the executions took place, prisoners were interrogated for a few minutes by a commission made up of clerics regarding their past activities, beliefs, their attitudes regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran and whether or not they performed the daily prayers. While many prisoners were under the impression at the time that the questions were asked with a view to granting amnesty, the commission ultimately became

¹For full details of trial proceedings in the Islamic Republic of Iran see Amnesty International's external document: [Iran: Unfair trials of political detainees](#) (AI: Index MDE 13/15/92).

AI Index: MDE 13/18/92 Amnesty International October 1992

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known as the "Death Commission". The late Ayatollah Khomeini had reportedly issued a fatwa (religious edict) sanctioning the execution of any prisoner who failed to fulfil his or her religious obligations. Most of the executed were supporters of the PMOI, but hundreds were members or sympathizers of other political opposition groups, including the Communist Unity, the various Fedaiyan organizations, Komala, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), Peykar, Rah Kargar and the Tudeh Party.

The authorities stopped all family visits without warning or giving any reason. They also stopped providing newspapers to prisoners and removed television sets from prisons. For weeks no one knew what was happening and it was only later that their families' worst fears were confirmed. A former political prisoner recently told Amnesty International:

"The complete blackout continued for two and a half to three months. In some prisons and in my own block, we asked officials to come to us and explain - some of us were gravely ill. I myself had to take medication which I could only get from my family. The officers said that no one would come and explain... `you must stay like this until there are instructions from the highest authorities'. They also took some of those gathering to ask them questions and put them in solitary cells in different blocks..."

Executions took place in many prisons throughout the country, particularly in Gohardasht and Evin prisons. A former prisoner told Amnesty International he believed that around 1,000 executions took place during the second half of 1988 in Gohardasht alone and most of them, around 650, were suspected members or sympathizers of the PMOI and the rest were members or sympathisers of left-wing organizations. In the women's section at Evin Prison around 200 women members or sympathizers of the PMOI were separated from the rest of the prisoners before they were executed. A former political prisoner who survived the massacre testified that some prisoners first knew about the fate of their companions when through a window they caught a glimpse of a `huge pile of rubber slippers which numbered maybe 1,000'. Another former prisoner told Amnesty International:

"When they [guards] sent me to the left-hand hall [in Evin prison] and called the names of 20, someone sat in front of me and called me. It was AB, from Fedaiyan Minority. We knew each other from prison... He said: `Do you know about the execution of the Mojahedin people?'. I said no. AB said that 5 or 600 Mojahedin had been hanged. I asked him how he knew. He said he was from hall 20. Hall 20 was on the ground floor, next to the big Hosseiniya [a place for prayer and other religious gatherings], and he was able to see out from there. AB had seen that they had hanged them in a big hall in the Hosseiniya and sent the bodies out in big trucks. I asked him: `are they prisoners or new arrests after an attack?'. He said `they are prisoners', and started to mention some names... AB said he heard some Pasdaran [Revolutionary guards] saying that 10 minutes on the rope was not enough. `Some of them are not dead when we bring them down. It is better to shoot them.' When they found that AB was listening to them they beat him up. At this point I was sure that all those in the hall would be executed. AB and his brother, MB [also from Fedaiyan Minority], were executed... By the end of the day they [Pasdaran] had called four groups of 20 names. They were all executed".

Because the executions were carried out in secret, it is impossible to say exactly how many people were killed. Former political detainees who witnessed the massacre have told Amnesty International that they believed the overall number of those executed during that period was between 5,000 and 10,000, including around 2,000 in Tehran alone. Among those killed were many prisoners of conscience. Many were already serving their prison terms when the PMOI's armed incursion took place and could not have

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possibly been involved in spying or terrorist activities as the government claimed. Many of those executed had been tried and sentenced to long prison terms in the early 1980s simply for non-violent political activities such as distributing anti-government leaflets and newspapers, taking part in demonstrations and collecting donations for prisoners' families.

Nasrin Rasooli, a physics graduate born in 1958, was arrested in 1981 for supporting the PMOI, before it embarked on armed opposition against the Iranian authorities. After two years in detention, she became mentally ill and by 1986 her condition deteriorated further. Consequently, she was released apparently without having been charged or tried. In 1988 she was rearrested, like many other former political prisoners, and summarily executed.

The Iranian authorities have never acknowledged the mass executions of 1988 and no new safeguards have been introduced to prevent such mass killings from happening again. Many relatives still do not know for certain whether missing members of their families were among those killed, and if they do know, they may still be left in ignorance as to where their bodies are buried. Horrifying pictures were smuggled out of Iran showing half-buried bodies in shallow mass graves. Amnesty International continues to hold the Iranian authorities to account for the massive loss of life. They have been urged to reveal the identities of all the victims, dates of deaths and places of burial.

One woman described to Amnesty International how she had dug up the body of an executed man with her bare hands as she searched for her husband's corpse in Jadeh Khavaran cemetery in Tehran in August 1988:

"Groups of bodies, some clothed, some in shrouds, had been buried in unmarked shallow graves in the section of the cemetery reserved for executed leftist political prisoners. The stench of the corpses was appalling but I started digging with my hands because it was important for me and my two little children that I locate my husband's grave."

She unearthed a body with its face covered in blood but when she cleaned it off she saw that it was not her husband. Other relatives visiting the graveyard discovered her husband's grave some days later. A member of a communist group, he had been arrested in early 1985, tortured for several months and convicted after a summary trial. He never learned what his sentence was. His wife had been turned away from Evin Prison on a regular visiting day in early August 1988, and had then started her quest for information which led her to the unmarked common grave.

Executions of political prisoners have continued, among those executed in 1991 at least 60 people were reported to have been executed for their political activities, including members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and the PMOI. In October 1991, more than 20 members of a Baluchi tribe in Zahedan were reportedly executed in public, shortly after their arrest. During the second half of April 1992, at least 40 alleged members or sympathizers of the PMOI were reportedly executed in Tehran. As in 1988, executions are often not announced and it remains difficult to obtain full details.

SUMMARY EXECUTIONS FOLLOWING RIOTS AND DEMONSTRATIONS

On 10 June 1992 at least four people were hanged in Mashhad prison. The execution of Javad

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Ganj Khanloo, Golamhossein Pourshirzad, Ali Sadeqi and Hamid Javid was announced by Tehran Radio. They were all arrested in Mashhad on 30 May 1992, in connection with the widespread riots which had erupted in the city. The riots were apparently sparked off by the municipal authorities' attempts to destroy illegally-constructed dwellings and forcibly evict their inhabitants, and by general discontent with the government's social and economic policies. The four were convicted of various charges which included "creating terror", the use of firearms and setting fire to government buildings. One was also charged with burning books which included the Qur'an.

Prior to the execution of the four people, the Head of Judiciary, Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi, was quoted by Reuters on 1 June 1992 as saying that: "... swift and decisive justice would be meted out to rioters..." and that a number of experienced judges had been assigned special briefs to deal with the perpetrators of the Mashhad disturbances "with decisiveness and power".

In April and May 1992 several other Iranian towns, including Shiraz, Arak, Bukan and parts of Tehran, saw widespread demonstrations in protest against the government's social and economic policies. On 11 June 1992 the official Islamic Republic News Agency announced that a further four people had been executed and five others had been sentenced to death for participating in the riots which took place in Shiraz in May 1992. Amnesty International fears that the true total may be much higher.

EXECUTION OF INDIVIDUALS ON RELIGIOUS GROUNDS

Reports of people executed because of their religious or ethnic backgrounds have continued to reach Amnesty International. In December 1990 a Christian pastor, the Reverend Hossein Soodmand, was executed in Mashhad apparently on charges of apostasy. He had converted to Christianity more than 20 years ago.

Members of the Baha'i faith continue to be persecuted. Bahman Samandari, a businessman and member of a prominent Baha'i family, was reportedly summarily executed in secret in Evin Prison on 18 March 1992 after he had been summoned there to sign some documents. Amnesty International believes that both Hossein Soodmand and Bahman Samandari were prisoners of conscience.

EXECUTIONS FOR CRIMINAL OFFENCES

Following the mass killing of political prisoners during the second half of 1988, the number of executions for other crimes, especially for drug trafficking offences increased sharply from January 1989 onwards, following instructions given to the judiciary by the then Chief Justice Ayatollah Ardebili. He recommended that trials in serious criminal cases should take place immediately and that, in cases of convicted prisoners, only a matter of a few days should elapse between arrest and execution.

In 1989 Amnesty International recorded over 1500 executions announced for criminal offences, more than 1000 of them for drug-trafficking offences. In 1990 at least 750 prisoners were executed, 441 of them for drug-related offences. In 1991 Amnesty International recorded at least 775 executions. The total figure in each year is expected to be considerably higher. According to Iranian press reports in 1991, the majority of death sentences were passed for drug-smuggling offences.

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Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed concern about the high number of executions carried out in the Islamic Republic of Iran, in a number of documents and communications to the authorities, and remains unconditionally opposed to the death penalty, which it considers as the most extreme form of cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment and a violation of the right to life. While the organization fully recognizes the need for the Iranian Government to take effective measures to punish illicit drug-trafficking, the death penalty has not been shown to have any special deterrent effects against this offence. Amnesty International is deeply concerned that the anti-drug campaign has led to increasingly arbitrary arrest and summary trial procedures rapidly followed by executions, despite the Iranian authorities' claim that all convicts "went through the appropriate legal procedures, and their cases were studied and heard by several judicial authorities and courts of justice."

As long as executions of prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, continue Amnesty International will continue to publicize this and other human rights abuses in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The organization fears that this trend may well continue unless the international community demonstrates its concern by putting pressure on the Iranian Government to put an end to executions and to improve its human rights record.