

AI Index: PRE01/281/2012
11 June 2012

Iran must not execute five Arab minority prisoners

The Iranian authorities must immediately overturn the death sentences of five members of Iran's Ahwazi Arab minority who were tried unfairly and may face imminent public execution, Amnesty International said after the prisoners were moved to an unknown location at the weekend.

The men were transferred out of the general section of Karoun Prison in the south-western city of Ahvaz on Saturday, prompting concerns their death sentences may be about to be carried out.

The group includes three brothers, Abd al-Rahman Heidari, Taha Heidari and Jamshid Heidari, their cousin Mansour Heidari and Amir Muawi.

All five were arrested in April 2011 amid unrest in Khuzestan province – where most of Iran's Ahwazi Arab minority lives – and were later convicted of moharebeh (“enmity against God”) for killing a law enforcement official.

“Iran must urgently halt any plans to execute these five Ahwazi men. The death sentences of all who languish on death row in Iranian prisons should be overturned or commuted,” said Ann Harrison, Deputy Middle East and North Africa Programme Director at Amnesty International.

“Their families must be informed immediately of their whereabouts and fate, and they should be allowed access to lawyers of their choice. While held, they must be protected from all forms of torture or other ill-treatment and granted all necessary medical care.”

Death row prisoners are generally transferred to solitary confinement shortly before their executions take place.

Under Iranian law, lawyers must receive 48 hours' notice of their client's execution, but it is not clear whether these five men have ever been permitted legal representation.

Around 5 March 2012, Iranian Ministry of Intelligence officials informed the men's families that Iran's Supreme Court had upheld the death penalty for all five prisoners.

It is not known when the men's initial trials before a Revolutionary Court took place. Their families have said the men “confessed” to murder, but did so under torture or other ill-treatment. Iranian courts frequently accept “confessions” extracted under duress as evidence.

Ahwazi Arabs, one of Iran's many minorities, live mainly in the oil-rich south-western province of Khuzestan.

They often complain 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.

In April 2005, Khuzestan province was the scene of mass demonstrations after reports that Iran's government planned to disperse Ahwazi Arabs from the area and to attempt to make them to lose their identity as Ahwazi Arabs.

A series of bomb explosions in the city of Ahvaz and at oil installations in late 2005 and early 2006 prompted several waves of mass arbitrary arrests in the region. At least 15 men were later executed based on their alleged involvement in the bombings.

In April 2011, members of the Ahwazi Arab minority organized "Day of Rage" protests across Khuzestan province to mark the sixth anniversary of the earlier unrest.

Afterwards, Amnesty International was given the names of 27 people allegedly killed in clashes with the security forces, including in Ahvaz's Malashiya neighbourhood.

Ahwazi Arab sources claim there were more casualties, while the authorities claim only three people died.

Around the time of the protests, between March and May 2011, at least four Ahwazi Arab men reportedly died in custody, possibly as a result of torture or other ill-treatment. Others were hospitalized for injuries sustained while in detention.

In early May 2011, the Iranian authorities reportedly executed at least eight Ahwazi Arabs – including Hashem Hamidi, believed to be 16 years old – for their alleged role in the deaths of a law enforcement official and two others during the clashes.

It is not clear if this is the same policeman that the five men were also accused of killing.

In the run-up to Iran's parliamentary elections in March this year, mass arrests in at least three separate locations in Khuzestan province resulted in the detention of some 50 to 65 people, and a further two deaths in custody were reported.

"Ahwazi Arabs – like everyone else in Iran – have the right to peacefully express their opposition to government policies. Iran's authorities must review legislation which discriminates against Ahwazi Arabs and other ethnic and religious minorities. Otherwise, the cycle of grievance, protest and unrest will only continue," said Ann Harrison.

"The authorities must launch independent, impartial investigations into the ongoing reports of torture and other ill-treatment in Iranian prisons and detention centres – whether of Ahwazi Arabs or others – and bring to justice anyone found responsible for abuses."

Background

Amnesty International recognizes the rights and responsibilities of governments to bring to justice those suspected of criminal offences. However, they must do so in a manner which respects human rights. When policing demonstrations, any force used must be both necessary and proportionate, and intentional lethal force should not be used except when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.