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Public Statement

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Iran: Ethnic minorities facing new wave of human rights violations

Amnesty International is greatly concerned by continuing violations of the rights of members of Iran's ethnic minorities, including Iranian Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Baluchis, and Arabs. Within the past two weeks, hundreds of Iranian Azerbaijani linguistic and cultural rights activists have been arrested in connection with demands that they should be allowed to be educated in their own language; Kurdish rights activists have been detained, and demonstrators killed or injured; and a Baluchi accused of responsibility for a bomb explosion on 14 February 2007 was executed just five days later.

As Iran's ethnic minorities face growing restrictions, Amnesty International is calling on the government to ensure that all Iranian citizens are accorded, both in law and practice, the linguistic and cultural rights set out in Iran's constitution as well as in international law, and are able peacefully to demonstrate in support of such rights. The Iranian authorities must also ensure that the police and other law enforcement agencies do not use excessive force, that all detainees are protected from torture or other ill-treatment, and that all reports of torture or other ill treatment, excessive use of force or killings by the security forces are investigated promptly, thoroughly and independently, with the methods and findings made public. Anyone suspected to be responsible for abuses should be brought to justice promptly in a trial that complies with international standards of fairness, and without recourse to the death penalty.

Iranian Azerbaijanis

The arrests of Iranian Azerbaijanis occurred in the run up to, and during, peaceful demonstrations on International Mother Language Day, an annual commemoration initiated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) on 21 February.

The demonstrations were held to support demands that their own language should be used as the medium of instruction in schools and places of education in those areas of north-west Iran where most Iranian Azerbaijanis reside. The protest organizers are reported to have sought official authorisation in advance, though it is not known whether it was granted. Most of those detained in advance of the demonstrations, which were held in Tabriz, Orumiye and other towns in the north-west, were soon released as of 26 February between 10-20 people may still be held.

Ebrahim Kazemi, Ja'afar 'Abedini and Mehdi Mola'i, were among a group of up to 12 people detained in Qom on or around 11 February 2007, at least two of whom were reportedly arrested for having painted slogans on walls, including 'Türk dilinde medrese' (Schooling in [Azerbaijani] Turkic). They were reportedly held for several days before being released on bail. Ja'afar 'Abedini and Mehdi Mola'i were reportedly ill treated while in detention by being forced by Ministry of Intelligence officials to drink liquids which caused them to vomit.

In Orumiye, up to 60 Iranian Azerbaijanis have reportedly been arrested, including Esmail Javadi, a journalist and Iranian Azerbaijani cultural rights activist. He was arrested on 18 February 2007 and may continue to be held in a Ministry of Intelligence detention facility in the Doqquz Pilleh district of the city.

At least 15 arrests are said to have been made in Zenjan, where a reportedly peaceful demonstration was held in the city's Sabze Square. Those detained include journalist Sa'id Metinpour, well-known locally for his human rights activities; he is said to have had blood on his lips when he was taken away raising concern that he may have been assaulted by police.

Ramin Sadeghi, who was detained in Ardabil on 19 February 2007, is one of approximately 20 who were detained in the city in connection with International Mother Language Day events. Only he remains in detention at the time of writing and his family are reportedly concerned about his medical condition.

Kurds

On 20 February 2007, Kurdish students held an event at Tehran University's Department of Literature. They called for the teaching of Kurdish in Iran's education system and at the University of Sanandaj, the capital of Kurdistan province.

The students reportedly signed a public statement which stated, in part, that 'In today's multicultural climate in the world, based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other humanitarian principles, every nation should have a right to develop and advance its language.'

In recent months, several Kurdish journalists and human rights defenders have been detained and some are facing trial. In addition, on 16 February 2007, three Kurds, including one woman, were reportedly killed in the course of a demonstration in Mahabad. An unconfirmed report states that a dispute between demonstrators and security forces resulted in the death of Bahman Moradi, aged 18, a woman called Malihe, whose surname is not known to Amnesty International, and one other. Dozens were reportedly injured in the course of the demonstration.

Iranian security forces have a history of the violent suppression of demonstrations by Kurds. For example, in February 2006 similar clashes between Kurdish demonstrators and the security forces in Maku and other towns reportedly led to at least nine deaths and scores, possibly hundreds, of arrests. In March 2006, Kurdish members of parliament (Majles) wrote to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad demanding an investigation into the killings and calling for those alleged to be responsible to be brought to justice. An investigation was reportedly set up, but its findings are not known. Some of those detained later reportedly received prison terms of between three and eight months.

Baluchis

In the province of Sistan-Baluchistan, the circumstances surrounding the extremely summary trial and execution of an Iranian Baluchi man, Nasrollah Shanbeh-Zehi, who was executed on 19 February 2007, calls into question the standards of administration of justice enjoyed by minorities without discrimination. Among five people reportedly arrested following the 14 February bombing of a bus carrying Revolutionary Guard security officials, which to date has killed a total 14 and injured around 30, Nasrollah Shanbeh-Zehi was shown "confessing" to the bombing on Iranian television on behalf of an Iranian Baluchi armed opposition group, Jondallah, and was executed in public at the site of the bombing.

Jondallah, which has carried out a number of armed attacks on Iranian officials and has on occasion killed hostages, reportedly seeks to defend the rights of the Baluchi people, though government officials have claimed that it is involved in drug smuggling and has ties to terrorist groups and to foreign governments. In March 2006, Jondallah killed 22 Iranian officials and took at least seven hostage in Sistan-Baluchistan province. Following the incident, scores, possibly hundreds, of people were arrested; many were reportedly taken to unknown locations. In the months following the attacks, the number of executions announced in Baluchi areas increased dramatically. Dozens were reported to have been executed by the end of the year.

Amnesty International condemns unequivocally the killing of hostages and urges Jondallah to desist from such and similar practices immediately. However, Amnesty International is concerned that Nasrollah Shanbeh-Zehi's "confession" may have been forced, and that the rapidity of his execution indicates that he did not receive a fair trial and was not permitted an adequate opportunity to appeal against his death sentence, if that was imposed by a court.

Arabs

In January and February 2007, Amnesty International deplored the execution of eight Iranian Arabs convicted after unfair trials of bombings in Khuzestan province in 2005. Other Iranian Arab prisoners are also at risk of execution after unfair trials.