



Demonstration in Ahvaz, Khuzestan - January 06
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The Arab Minority in Iran

Over the course of the last year, an increasing number of Urgent Actions (UAs) have been produced on behalf of members of minorities in Iran, including the Arab community. This piece looks at who they are, what their plight is and the role of the UA Network in providing support for a historically discriminated section of Iranian society.

The mainly Shi'a-Muslim Arab community in Iran constitutes between three per cent and eight per cent of the total population. They mainly live in Khuzestan province (known as Ahwaz by the Arab community) which adjoins Iraq and which contains much of the country's oil

resources. They are one of the most economically and socially deprived social groups and have long-standing grievances against successive governments. They claim to have been overlooked during the distribution of resources aimed at social development. Many of their villages and settlements reportedly have little or no access to clean running water, sanitation or other utilities such as electricity, and thousands of Iranian Arabs have been subject to forced evictions from their homes or lands.

Their schools are reportedly not allowed to teach in the medium of Arabic, even

when the majority of the local population is Arabic-speaking. Their illiteracy rates are reportedly high, especially among Ahwazi Arab women in rural areas. Iranian Arabs have also reportedly been denied state employment under the *gozinesh* criteria. This is a form of ideological selection which requires state employees to demonstrate, among other things, allegiance to Islam, and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Tension has mounted among the Iranian Arab population since April 2005, when scores died, hundreds were injured and hundreds more detained following demonstrations against a letter allegedly written in 1999 by a presidential adviser, who denied its authenticity. The letter appeared to set out policies for the reduction of the Arab population of Khuzestan, including resettling members of the Arab minority in other regions of Iran, resettling non-Arabs in the province, and replacing Arabic place names with Persian ones. (The text, with an English translation, can be found at <http://www.ahwaz.org.uk/images/ahwaz-khuzestan.pdf>; the supposed author's denial that he wrote the letter, along with an explanation of the contents, can be found (in Persian) at <http://www.webneveshteha.com/>). The security forces appear to have used excessive force in stopping the demonstration resulting in unlawful killings or possible extra-judicial executions.

Since then, the cycle of violence has intensified in the province. Scores of Iranian Arabs were arrested following four pre-election bomb blasts in the city of Ahvaz in Khuzestan province and two others in Tehran in June 2005 which killed up to 10 people and injured at least 90. Other bombs in October 2005 and January 2006 killed at least 12 people and were followed by waves of arrests. Arrests have also followed demonstrations on culturally significant occasions such as the Muslim festivals of *'Id al-Fitr* and *'Id al-Adha*. The UA

network has been called on to respond to the deteriorating situation on at least five occasions during 2005 and six during 2006. Appeal letters have been written calling for the Iranian government to end discrimination and restrictions on social, cultural, linguistic and religious freedoms which often result in other human rights violations, such as the imprisonment of prisoners of conscience; grossly unfair trials of political prisoners before Revolutionary Courts; use of the death penalty; and restrictions on movement and denial of other civil rights. (For example see UA 24/06, MDE 13/006/2006, 1 February 2006 and follow-ups)

Amnesty International has received the names of around 500 Iranian Arabs detained since April 2005, some repeatedly, although the true number of detainees is likely to be much higher. Among them is Yousuf Azizi Bani Toruf, an Iranian Arab journalist and member of the Writers' Association, who was arrested on 25 April 2005 after a press conference at which he spoke in support of the Arab demonstrators in Khuzestan (see UA 109/95, MDE 13/020/2005 6 May 2005 and follow up MDE 13/032/2005). He was released on bail on 28 June 2005 and is currently facing trial, apparently on charges of "endangering national security" in connection with participation in the unrest in Khuzestan, which he denies, on the grounds that he was in Tehran at the time.



Imad Bawi ©
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In another case, five brothers, their father and three other members of their extended family were arrested in or around August 2005 (see UA 233/05 MDE

13/051/2005 and follow ups). Imad and Zamel Bawi have reportedly been sentenced to death,

Moslem and Hani Bawi, and two members of their extended family, Mansour Tayouri and Hassan Bou Azar, have both reportedly been sentenced to lengthy prison terms and 10 years' exile, both to be spent in provinces far away from their homes. There is no further information concerning the situation of another brother, Mohsen, who remains in detention. A cousin, Asad Bawi, was released on bail on 2 May 2006. At least nine other men are believed to be at risk of execution (see UA 57/06, MDE 13/023/2006, 10 March 2006) after being convicted in unfair trials before a Revolutionary Court. Seven of them either appeared on local television "confessing" to bombings in Khuzestan, or were mentioned in those "confessions". Two of the seven were executed the following morning. Three of the nine - Ali Manbouhi, Ali Helfi and Nazem Bureihi - have reportedly been in custody since 2000, when they were arrested on charges of "insurgency" and each sentenced to 35 years' imprisonment. However, they also featured in the "confessions" footage.



Massoumeh Ka'bi and her son Imad © AHRO

At least four women and two children are currently detained by the security forces in

Khuzestan province, south western Iran (see UA 65/06, MDE 13/028/2006 and follow up, and UA 107/06, MDE 13/042/2006). Amnesty International believes they are very likely to be prisoners of conscience held solely in order to force their husbands and fathers to give themselves up to the Iranian authorities or to cooperate with them and provide information about wanted Iranian Arab activists. Another woman, Massoumeh Ka'bi and her four-year-old son Imad, were released on bail on 28 April 2006 after appeals were sent on their behalf.

The role of Urgent Actions

Amnesty International recognizes that the situation in Khuzestan is volatile and that violent crimes have been committed. The Iranian authorities have a duty and responsibility to investigate these crimes and to prosecute those alleged to have perpetrated them. However, in carrying out this responsibility, the Iranian authorities are obliged to act in accordance with international human rights law and to respect relevant international human standards, including the prohibition of torture and international standards on fair trial. In practice, however, the Iranian authorities have repeatedly failed over many years to abide by these human rights obligations, although Iran is a party to various international human rights treaties, and have been responsible for gross and widespread violations of human rights which cannot be justified on any grounds, including the threat of attacks and violent crimes by persons or groups opposed to the government.

Currently, with international attention focused on Iran's nuclear programme, Amnesty International is concerned both that this may overshadow continuing human rights violations and also result in the Iranian government intensifying pressure on those individuals and groups, including minority communities, within Iranian society who it perceives to be critics or opponents of the Islamic Republic government.

Urgent Actions play an important role in creating international pressure on behalf of those suffering or at risk of human rights violations. They are also an important part of raising awareness of the human rights situation of communities who face discrimination and whose members may suffer human rights violations in the course of protesting against such discrimination. The Iran team has often been told by contacts that Urgent Actions have played a crucial

role in securing the release of detainees
or an improvement in their situation.