

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

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### **Iran: Authorities should exercise restraint in policing Babek Castle gathering and address human rights violations against Iranian Azeri Turks**

As the annual Babek Castle cultural gathering of Iranian Azeri Turks approaches on 30 June 2006, Amnesty International is urging the Iranian authorities to exercise restraint while policing the gathering. In addition, it is calling on the authorities urgently to address increasing human rights violations being committed by Iranian security forces and others against members of Iran's Azeri Turkish minority (who sometimes refer to themselves as Iranian Azerbaijanis).

The largest ethnic minority in Iran, the Azeri Turkish community is believed to number between 25-30 percent of the total population and is found mainly in the north-west. Mostly Shi'a Muslims, like the majority of the population, they are not subject to as much discrimination as minorities of other religions, and are well-integrated into the economy. In recent years, however, they have increasingly called for greater cultural and linguistic rights, such as the right to be taught in Turkish and to celebrate Azerbaijani culture and history at events such as at the annual Babek Castle gathering and Constitution Day, celebrated in October. A small minority advocate the secession of Iranian Azerbaijani provinces and union with the Republic of Azerbaijan. Activists who promote Azeri Turkish cultural identity are viewed with suspicion by the Iranian authorities, who often charge them with vaguely worded offences such as "promoting pan-Turkism".

The annual Babek Castle gathering has reportedly been held for the last six years at Babek (or Bazz) castle in the town of Kalayber, north-western Iran. Each year, thousands of Azeri Turks gather in Kalayber and walk up to the castle to celebrate the birthday of Babek Khorramdin, who lived in the ninth century and is regarded as a hero by Iranian Azeri Turks. These gatherings have frequently met with repression on the part of the Iranian authorities. In 2005, for example, scores of people were reportedly arrested and at least 21 were sentenced to prison terms of up to one year, though some of these were suspended.

Mass demonstrations broke out in towns and cities in north-west Iran following the publication on 12 May 2006 of a cartoon in the state-owned daily newspaper, *Iran*, which offended many in the Azeri Turkish community. The government suspended publication of the newspaper on 23 May and both the editor-in-chief and cartoonist were arrested. Protests began on a small scale mainly among Azeri Turkish students in universities in Tehran and Tabriz, but rapidly to Azeri Turkish areas. A huge demonstration took place in Tabriz on 22 May and further demonstrations were held in other places in the following days. Most of these protests were peaceful, but some ended with attacks on government buildings and cars. Some Iranian Azeri Turkish sources have claimed these attacks were instigated by government agents. The Iranian government has accused the United States (US) and other outside forces of stirring up the unrest. The US government has denied this.

The Iranian authorities reportedly used excessive force to disperse demonstrators, including beatings and lethal gunfire. Amnesty International has received the names of 27 people who are alleged to have been killed, including seven in Tabriz and 14 in Naqadeh (known as Sulduz by Iranian Azeri Turks). One, 26-year-old Jalil Abedi was reportedly shot in the left side of his head by a member of Iran's Intelligence service in Meshkin Shahr (known as Khiyov in Azeri Turkish) during a demonstration on 25 May, and left to die by security officials who would not let a doctor treat him. His family were reportedly prevented from holding his funeral in a mosque and only a few of them were permitted to attend his burial. The Iranian authorities have generally denied that any deaths occurred during the demonstrations, although a police official acknowledged publicly on 29 May that four people had been killed and 43 injured in Naqadeh.

Hundreds, possibly thousands, of demonstrators, are reported to have been detained, of whom Amnesty International has received the names of almost 200. On 23 June, Hojjatoleslam Aghazadeh, Head of the Office of the Ministry of Justice in East Azerbaijan province, told the press that some 330 people had been arrested in Tabriz, most of whom had already been released, although as many as 85 would be tried later. He said that 20 to 25 people had been identified as playing a major role in the disturbances and that some were Baha'is, some Tudeh party members (communists) and two had "links with Israel".

While many protestors have been released, scores are believed to remain in detention, including Changiz Bakhtavar, Dr Ahmad Gholipour Rezaie (known as Dr Heydaroglu) and Hassan Ali Hajabollu (known as Hassan Ark), all of whom were detained after the Tabriz demonstration on 22 May. Hassan Damirchi, aged 65, a businessman and a well-known musician from Tabriz (also known as Hassan Azerbaijan) and his son Babak were arrested at home on 26 May and Gholam Reza Amani was detained on 28 May; he is now reported to be on hunger strike. Some or all of these may have been transferred to Evin prison in Tehran for questioning but their current whereabouts are unclear. Some detainees are reported to have been tortured, including Davoud Maghami, held in Parsabad (known as Mughan in Azeri Turkish) who is said to have required hospital treatment as a result. He has now been released.

Other prominent Azeri Turkish activists who are reported to have been detained include Abbas Lisani (or Leysanli), who was arrested on 3 June when he returned home after hiding for a week following a demonstration in Ardebil in which he was beaten by security forces. He is reportedly on hunger strike and his condition is causing concern. His home telephone line has apparently been cut, possibly to prevent his wife publicising his plight. Abbas Lisani has previously been detained several times because of his political activities on behalf of the Azeri Turkish community, including during or following the Babek Castle gatherings in 2003 and 2005. He was severely tortured during his arrest at a sit-in protest by Azeri Turks at the Sarcheshme Mosque in Ardebil in June 2004.

In advance of this year's Babek Castle gathering, Iranian security forces are reported to be carrying out arrests, possibly to prevent certain individuals attending. One, Akbar Qorbani, was reportedly arrested on 26 June at his workplace in Ardebil by unidentified men in plain clothes (*lebas-e shakhsi*), having previously been threatened by such people since he took part in the demonstration in Ardebil. Another, political activist Ebrahim Ja'farzadeh, was reportedly arrested on 26 June in Khoy after being summoned to an Intelligence Ministry facility; he was released the next day. On 27 June, Reza Abbasi, a member of ASMEK (Association for the Defence of Azerbaijani political prisoners) and of the Office for Strengthening Unity (Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat), a student body, was reportedly arrested in Zenjan after he refused to comply with a verbal summons to attend an Intelligence Ministry facility for interrogation. On the same day, Jahanbaksh Bekhtavar, the brother of Changiz Bekhtavar (see above) was reportedly arrested at his home in Tabriz by Intelligence Ministry officials who are also said to have confiscated his books and other personal belongings. Also on 27 June, 'Isa Yeganeh, the managing director of the suspended newspaper *Payam-e Sulduz* was reportedly arrested in Naqadeh, Sayed Mehdi Sayedzadeh was arrested in Tabriz and at least five people released after the May demonstrations in Miandoab were reportedly redetained.

Amnesty International recognizes that the Iranian authorities have a right and a responsibility to bring those suspected of criminal offences to justice. However it is concerned that many of those detained may be prisoners of conscience, detained solely on account of their peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression and association, or on account of their peaceful political activities on behalf of the Iranian Azeri

Turkish community.

Amnesty International is calling on the Iranian authorities to

respect international human rights standards in relation to the policing of the Babek Castle gathering and ensure that those responsible for law enforcement conform at all times with standards such as the United Nations Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials

release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally. Other detainees should be released unless they are to be charged with a recognizably criminal offence and brought to trial promptly and fairly

grant all detainees prompt and regular access to lawyers of their own choosing and their families and to appropriate medical care if necessary

investigate all allegations of torture or ill-treatment promptly and thoroughly. The methods and findings of any such investigation should be made public. Anyone implicated in human rights violations should be brought to justice promptly and fairly and victims of torture and ill-treatment should be granted compensation

ensure that any trials respect, as a minimum standard, the relevant provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

investigate all possible unlawful killings or extra-judicial executions promptly and fairly in accordance with the UN Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extralegal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions, and bring to justice, fairly and promptly, any members of the security forces responsible for unlawful killings or other grave violations of human rights.