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Iran: Stop using Basij militia to police demonstrations

Following reports from Iran that members of the Basij militia have used excessive force against demonstrators - and in light of the history of abuses committed by this unaccountable branch of the security forces - Amnesty International calls on the government of Iran to stop using the militia to police demonstrations with immediate effect.

The Basij militia is a volunteer paramilitary force of men and women under the control of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Its members are found in schools, universities, state and private institutions, factories, and even among tribes. Basij forces are widely used to help to maintain law and order and repress dissent, and have frequently been accused of using extreme brutality.

Many of those who took part in the recent demonstrations claim non - uniformed and armed personnel, whom they believed to be members of the Basij militia, used excessive force and carried out human rights violations – including beatings and use of firearms - against demonstrators on the streets. A video of a member of the Basij shooting from an building used by the Basij during the demonstrations on Monday 15 June in which at least 8 people were killed should have triggered an immediate investigation by the authorities and clear instructions should have been issued to prevent further loss of life. Another video of a young woman identified as Neda, dying apparently from a chest wound, has been widely circulated amid claims of involvement of Basij members.

The response of the Iranian authorities has not been to open a proper investigation to clarify the circumstances of any death but rather to issue further warnings that protests will be handled in a ‘revolutionary manner’ by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, the Basij militia and other police and security forces.

“Iranians wishing to peacefully express their opposition to recent events surrounding the election have no space to do so, as they are met with violence that has been legitimized by the highest authority in the land,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme. “It’s time for the Iranian authorities to allow peaceful protest and to remove the Basij from the streets. The policing of any demonstrations should be left to the police or other security forces which are properly trained and equipped.”

Following the speech from Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, on Friday demanding an end to the protests, there were further demonstrations on Saturday in Tehran and other cities and towns across the country. 13 people were killed according to the authorities and many more were injured. According to the government, over 400 people were arrested. Another demonstration of about 1,000 people in Tehran on Monday has been met with tear gas and arrests.

“Recent statements from the police, who denied opening fire on protestors, and from the Tehran Prosecutor-

General, who blamed the killings on ‘armed terrorists’, look like an attempt to disassociate state organs from responsibility for violence,” said Hassiba Hadj Saharaoui. “This is all the more reason to stop using the Basij as there is no way for the public to even identify them, let alone bring them to account for violations. If the Iranian authorities are not able to control such a militia, they should disband it. It is irresponsible to provide weapons and then to relinquish responsibility when abuses occur”.

Amnesty International calls on the Iranian authorities to investigate fully all reports of death, including possible extrajudicial executions, and to bring anyone found responsible to justice.