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IRAN: MOMENTOUS STEPS TOWARDS JUSTICE FOR 1988 PRISON MASSACRES

Unprecedented steps towards justice for the victims of the 1988 prison massacres have been taken by the governments of Sweden, Belgium and Liechtenstein in recent weeks, sending a message to the Iranian authorities that those responsible for crimes against humanity will not escape justice, Amnesty International said today. The developments should prompt the international community to establish a long overdue UN investigation.

In a historic move, Swedish authorities arrested an Iranian man on 9 November on suspicion of “crime in Iran against international law, gross crime, and murder during the period of 28 July – 31 August 1988 in Tehran, Iran”. This is a period during which the Iranian authorities forcibly disappeared several thousand political dissidents in prisons in Tehran and many other cities across the country and extrajudicially executed them in secret. On 13 November, the Swedish Prosecution Authority [announced](#) that the prosecutor needs to decide by 11 December 2019 whether to indict the person in question.

In another significant development, at the UN Human Rights Council, the governments of Belgium and Liechtenstein submitted questions to Iran for the first time about the fate of the victims and the whereabouts of their remains, in advance of Iran’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR) session on 8 November 2019.

Belgium asked whether the Iranian government is “planning to disclose the truth regarding the ongoing enforced disappearances resulting from the secret extrajudicial executions of political dissidents in 1988, including the number and identities of those killed, the date, location, cause and circumstances of each disappearance and extrajudicial execution, and the location of their remains, and facilitate the return of the remains to family members”.

Liechtenstein asked “what steps... Iran [has] taken to investigate the extrajudicial killings of 1988, and to bring perpetrators, including current officials of Iran, to justice” and “to guarantee the right to truth, justice and reparation to the families of those extra-judicially executed during the summer of 1988”.

These developments are major contributions to the fight against impunity for the past and ongoing crimes against humanity relating to the 1988 prison massacres, including murder, enforced disappearance, persecution, torture and other inhumane acts. They are also a testament to the long struggle for truth and justice by survivors and victims’ families, who have been languishing in a cruel limbo for over three decades, not knowing where, why and how their loved ones were killed and where their bodies are buried.

Amnesty International welcomes the increased attention brought by these governments on the extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearance of several thousand political dissidents in Iran’s prisons between late July and early September 1988 and renews its calls on them and other states to take further concrete steps towards accountability. Such steps must include states exercising extraterritorial jurisdiction, including universal jurisdiction, to conduct independent and effective investigations and prosecutions whenever anyone reasonably suspected of criminal responsibility for these crimes travels to their territory, as now seen Sweden. In addition, all efforts must be taken towards establishing an independent UN investigation into the ongoing enforced disappearances resulting from the secret extrajudicial executions of 1988, including the situation of thousands of missing bodies buried in mass graves across the country.

BACKGROUND

In 2018, Amnesty International published a comprehensive report, entitled *Blood-soaked secrets: Why Iran's 1988 prison massacres are ongoing crimes against humanity*.¹ The report concluded that by continuing to systematically conceal the fate and whereabouts of victims of the mass secret extrajudicial killings of 1988 in Iran the Iranian authorities are committing the ongoing crime against humanity of enforced disappearance. This is in addition to the crimes against humanity of murder, extermination, persecution, torture and other inhumane acts which, according to the findings of the

¹ Amnesty International, *Blood-soaked secrets: Why Iran's 1988 prison massacres are ongoing crimes against humanity* (Index: MDE 13/9421/2018).

organization, were committed in Iran in 1988.² Amnesty International considers that the suffering inflicted on victims' families also violates the absolute prohibition on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment under international law.³

To date, no official in Iran has been brought to justice for the past and ongoing crimes against humanity related to the 1988 prison massacres. In fact, many of the officials involved continue to hold positions of power, including in key judicial, prosecutorial and government bodies responsible for ensuring that victims receive justice.⁴

The failure of the UN political bodies to act has had a devastating impact not only on survivors and victims' families but also on the rule of law and respect for human rights in the country. It has emboldened the Iranian authorities to continue the concealment of the fate of the victims and the location of their remains and maintain a strategy of deflection and denial regarding the enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions that continues to this day.

² Amnesty International, *Blood-soaked secrets*, pp. 115-119.

³ See also Amnesty International, *Iran's 1988 massacres: Authorities violating torture prohibition through cruel treatment of victims' families*, 26 June 2019, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/06/irans-1988-massacres-authorities-violating-torture-prohibition-through-cruel-treatment-of-victims-families/

⁴ Amnesty International, *Blood-soaked secrets*, pp. 127-128.