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The State of the World's Human Rights; Iran 2023

In the aftermath of the 2022 “Woman Life Freedom” uprising, authorities further suppressed the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and intensified their crackdown on women and girls defying compulsory veiling laws. Security forces crushed protests using unlawful force and mass arrests. Thousands were subjected to interrogation, arbitrary detention, unjust prosecution, and imprisonment for peacefully exercising their human rights. Enforced disappearances, and torture and other ill-treatment were widespread and systematic. Women and girls, LGBTI people, and ethnic and religious minorities were subjected to systemic discrimination and violence. Cruel and inhuman punishments, including flogging, were imposed and implemented. The use of the death penalty as a tool of political repression intensified and executions increased. Trials remained systematically unfair. Systemic impunity prevailed for past and ongoing crimes against humanity relating to prison massacres in 1988 and other crimes under international law.

Background

In March, the UN Human Rights Council renewed the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Iran. In his February report, he pointed to the “possible commission of international crimes, notably the crimes against humanity of murder, imprisonment, enforced disappearances, torture, rape and sexual violence, and persecution” during the “Woman Life Freedom” uprising of 2022.

The UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran, and other independent UN experts and international human rights monitors, were denied entry to Iran.

In November, in its concluding observations on the fourth periodic report on Iran, the UN Human Rights Committee called on the authorities to amend or repeal compulsory veiling laws and to disband the morality police. It also expressed concern about impunity for the pattern of lethal force used during largely peaceful protests, and called on authorities to establish impartial and independent investigations into killings, torture and other human rights violations during successive protests to ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice and victims receive reparation.

In May, unjustly imprisoned Belgian national Olivier Vandecasteele was released and allowed to leave Iran under a Belgium/Iran deal that enabled the premature release and return to Iran of Iranian intelligence agent Assadollah Asadi, who was serving a 20-year sentence in Belgium for a thwarted bomb attack against Iranian dissidents in France. The deal contributed to ongoing impunity for the commission of hostage-taking and other crimes under international law by the Iranian authorities (see Belgium entry).¹

Iran continued to provide military support to government forces in the armed conflict in Syria (see Syria entry).

Iran continued to provide drones to Russia, which were used to target and destroy civilian infrastructure in Ukraine, and transferred the technology and manufacturing expertise to allow Russia to manufacture the same drones.

Iran denied involvement in or prior knowledge of the 7 October attack on Israel by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups.

Freedom of expression, association and assembly

Authorities censored media, jammed satellite television channels, and continued to block and/or filter mobile apps and social media platforms, including Facebook, Google Play, Instagram, Signal, Telegram, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube.

The Internet User Protection Bill, which would violate people's right to privacy and further erode online freedoms and access to the global internet, remained pending before parliament.

Internet and mobile phone networks were disrupted during and ahead of expected protests.

The authorities resorted to repressive tactics to prevent mass nationwide protests, while security forces crushed smaller local protests using unlawful force and mass arrests.

In May, security forces used unlawful force against villagers protesting against a house demolition in Gojag village, Hormozgan province, resulting in injuries.

During and in advance of the anniversary of the "Woman Life Freedom" uprising in September, authorities suppressed protests and memorials, including by arbitrarily arresting relatives of victims and forcing thousands of university students to sign undertakings not to protest.²

Attacks on weekly Friday protests in Zahedan city in Sistan and Baluchestan province peaked on 20 October as security forces unlawfully used tear gas, shotguns and water cannons against thousands of protesters and worshippers, including children, and carried out mass arbitrary arrests.³

Thousands of people, including children, were subjected to abusive interrogations, arbitrary detention, unjust prosecution, and suspension or expulsion from education or employment for peacefully exercising their human rights. Victims included protesters, women removing mandatory headscarves in public, journalists, actors and musicians, writers and academics, university students, LGBTI individuals, and human rights defenders, including women's rights activists, anti-death penalty campaigners, lawyers, and families seeking truth and justice for victims of unlawful killings.

The authorities continued to ban independent political parties, civil society organizations and trade unions, and subjected workers and labour rights activists to reprisals for striking and holding peaceful gatherings, including on International Workers' Day.

Arbitrary detention and unfair trials

Trials were systematically unfair, resulting in thousands of people being arbitrarily detained. Systematic due process violations included denial of the right to a lawyer from the time of arrest, admission of torture-tainted "confessions" as evidence, and summary trials, resulting in imprisonment as well as sentences of flogging and death.

The judiciary played a central role in entrenching impunity for torture, enforced disappearances and other human rights violations, as it lacked independence and included senior officials who must themselves be investigated for crimes under international law.

Authorities sought to further undermine the independence of the Iranian Bar Association through legislative changes and other repressive measures.

Impunity prevailed for the ongoing practice of arbitrarily detaining foreign and dual nationals for leverage, which, in some cases, constituted the crime of hostage-taking.

The arbitrary house arrest of dissidents Mehdi Karroubi, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Zahra Rahnava entered its 13th year.

Enforced disappearances and torture and other ill-treatment

Authorities routinely subjected detainees to enforced disappearance and incommunicado detention, frequently in facilities controlled by the Ministry of Intelligence, the Revolutionary Guards and various bodies of Iran's police.⁴

Torture and other ill-treatment were widespread and systematic, including beatings, floggings, electric shocks, mock executions, denial of food and water, and prolonged solitary confinement. State television aired torture-tainted "confessions".

Prisoners were subjected to cruel and inhuman conditions, including extreme overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, poor ventilation, infestation with mice or insects, and poor or no access to bedding, toilet and washing facilities.

Prison officials and prosecution authorities often deliberately denied prisoners adequate healthcare, including for torture-related injuries. Suspicious deaths in custody amid credible reports of torture and other ill-treatment, including beatings and denial of healthcare, went unaddressed and unpunished. Among those who died in suspicious circumstances were Ebrahim Rigi and Javad Rouhi, who had been detained in relation to the 2022 uprising.

The Islamic Penal Code retained punishments amounting to torture and other ill-treatment, including flogging, blinding, amputation, crucifixion and stoning.

Courts issued at least 188 flogging sentences, and at least nine were implemented; two amputation sentences were implemented; and one blinding sentence was upheld by the Supreme Court, according to the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran.

Discrimination and violence against women and girls

The authorities continued to treat women as second-class citizens, including in relation to marriage, divorce, child custody, employment, inheritance and political office.

The legal age of marriage for girls remained at 13, and fathers could obtain judicial permission to subject their daughters to forced marriage at a younger age.

Authorities intensified their nationwide crackdown on women and girls who defied compulsory veiling, introducing policies that severely violated their social, economic, cultural, civil and political rights and restricted their freedom of movement.⁵ Punitive policies included: sending more than 1 million women SMS warnings threatening confiscation of their vehicles; immobilizing women's cars; denying women access to employment, education, healthcare, banking services and/or public transport; and referring women to the judiciary, which imposed imprisonment, fines and degrading punishments, such as washing corpses. Based on official announcements, over 1,800 businesses were forcibly closed for not enforcing compulsory veiling.

"Morality" policing returned, resulting in intensified harassment and violence against women and girls in public.

In December, the Expediency Council intervened to approve the draconian Bill to Support the Family by Promoting the Culture of Chastity and Hijab, and sent it for final approval to the Guardian Council, which returned the bill to parliament again for further amendments. The bill provides for up to 10 years' imprisonment for anyone who defies compulsory veiling, and criminalizes non-state actors, including businesses, who refuse to enforce compulsory veiling.

On 28 October, 16-year-old Armita Garawand died after 28 days in a coma amid reports that an enforcer of compulsory veiling laws assaulted her. Authorities arrested a journalist investigating the

incident, circulated propaganda videos absolving themselves of responsibility, and subjected those attending her commemorations to arbitrary detention, beatings and/or other forms of harassment.

Between January and April, thousands of schoolgirls were poisoned and hospitalized as a result of chemical attacks deliberately targeting girls' schools nationwide in what appeared to be a coordinated campaign to punish schoolgirls for removing their mandatory hijabs during the 2022 uprising. The authorities subjected parents, schoolgirls, teachers, journalists and others to violence, intimidation and arbitrary arrest for criticizing the authorities' failure to stop the attacks and for seeking truth and accountability.

In April, parliament approved the general principles of the bill Preventing Women from Harm and Improving Their Security Against Misbehaviour. Some of its provisions were referred for further examination to relevant parliamentary committees. The bill had been introduced over a decade ago to address violence against women, but the text was watered down to remove mentions of "violence". It failed to define domestic violence as an offence, criminalize marital rape and child marriage, and ensure men who murder their wives or daughters face proportionate punishments.

Authorities failed to provide adequate gender-specific healthcare to women prisoners.

Discrimination

Ethnic minorities

Ethnic minorities, including Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis, Kurds and Turkmen, faced widespread discrimination, curtailing their access to education, employment, adequate housing and political office. Continued under-investment in regions populated by ethnic minorities exacerbated poverty and marginalization.

Persian remained the sole language of instruction in primary and secondary education, despite repeated calls for linguistic diversity.

Security forces unlawfully killed with impunity dozens of unarmed Kurdish cross-border couriers (*kulbars*) between the Kurdistan regions of Iran and Iraq, as well as Baluchi fuel porters (*soukhtbar*) in Sistan and Baluchestan province.

Religious minorities

Religious minorities, including Baha'is, Christians, Gonabadi Dervishes, Jews, Sunni Muslims and Yaresan, suffered discrimination in law and practice, including in access to education, employment, child adoption, political office and places of worship. Hundreds were subjected to arbitrary detention, unjust prosecution, and torture and other ill-treatment for professing or practising their faith.

People born to parents classified as Muslim by the authorities risked arbitrary detention, torture or the death penalty for "apostasy" if they adopted other religions or atheism.

Members of the Baha'i minority were subjected to widespread and systematic violations, including through prohibition from higher education and forcible closure of their businesses or confiscation of their properties, as well as mass arbitrary detentions. Authorities prevented Baha'i burials in a cemetery they have used for decades in Tehran and forcibly buried several deceased Baha'is at the nearby Khavaran mass grave site, believed to contain the remains of victims of prison massacres in 1988, without their families' prior knowledge and in violation of Baha'i burial practices.

Authorities raided house churches and subjected Christian converts to arbitrary arrest and punishments such as imprisonment and internal "exile".

LGBTI people

LGBTI people suffered systemic discrimination and violence. Consensual same-sex sexual relations remained criminalized with punishments ranging from flogging to the death penalty.

State-endorsed “conversion therapies” amounting to torture or other ill-treatment remained prevalent, including against children. Hormone therapy and surgical procedures, including sterilization, were mandatory for legal gender recognition.

Gender non-conforming individuals risked criminalization and denial of access to education and employment.

Refugees’ and migrants’ rights

The estimated 5 million Afghan nationals in Iran faced widespread discrimination, including barriers to education, housing, employment, healthcare, banking services and freedom of movement.

State media and some officials railed against Afghan asylum seekers, fuelling hate speech and hate crimes against Afghan nationals in Iran.

In November, authorities announced that repatriation of “illegal” Afghan migrants had started in August and that, since then, 450,000 had “voluntarily” returned to Afghanistan.

Death penalty

Executions increased from 2022 and the number of drug-related executions almost doubled.

The death penalty was imposed after grossly unfair trials and for offences not meeting the threshold of the “most serious crimes” involving intentional killing. The offences included drug trafficking, financial corruption, vandalism, and vaguely worded offences such as “enmity against God” (*moharebeh*) and “corruption on earth” (*efsad-e fel-arz*).

The death penalty was also retained for acts protected by the rights to privacy and freedom of expression, religion or belief, including “insulting the Prophet”, drinking alcohol, and consensual same-sex sexual relationships between adults or outside marriage. Adultery remained punishable by stoning.

Authorities used the death penalty as a tool of political repression against protesters, dissidents and ethnic minorities.⁶

Two men were executed for “apostasy” solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of religion through social media activities.

Six young men were arbitrarily executed in relation to the 2022 uprising after unfair sham trials based on torture-tainted “confessions”.

The oppressed Baluchi minority made up a disproportionate number of those executed.⁷

Several individuals who were below 18 at the time of the crime were executed, including Hamidreza Azari, who was 17 at the time of his execution. Scores of others remained on death row.

Impunity

In May, the president announced the formation of the non-judicial Special Committee for Examining the Unrest of 2022 amid concerns over the impartiality and independence of its members. The committee failed to carry out investigations in line with international standards or make its findings public.

No public official was held accountable for unlawful killings, torture, enforced disappearance and other crimes under international law or grave human rights violations committed in 2023 or before.

Authorities continued to cover up torture and other ill-treatment, including rape and other forms of sexual violence, perpetrated by state officials against protesters detained during the 2022 uprising, and pressured victims to withdraw complaints or face reprisals. They also subjected families of victims unlawfully killed during the uprising to harassment and intimidation, arbitrary detention, bans on memorial ceremonies, and destruction of their loved ones' grave sites. They continued to deny responsibility for the 2022 death in custody of Jina/Mahsa Amini and harassed her family.

Authorities continued to conceal the truth surrounding the January 2020 missile strike against Ukraine International Airlines flight 752, which killed 176 people. In April, following a trial mired in secrecy, a military court sentenced a commander to 13 years' imprisonment and nine others to between one and three years in prison. In August, the case was sent for appeal to the Supreme Court.

Impunity prevailed for ongoing crimes against humanity relating to the extrajudicial execution and enforced disappearance of several thousand political dissidents in 1988, with many of those involved holding top official positions, including the president.

Right to a healthy environment

Environmental experts criticized the authorities' failure to address Iran's environmental crisis, marked by loss of lakes, rivers and wetlands; deforestation; air pollution; water pollution caused by the discharge of wastewater into urban water sources; and land subsidence.

Iran maintained high levels of fossil fuel production and subsidies.

1. [“Iran/Belgium: Iran must be held accountable for hostage-taking after overdue release of Olivier Vandecasteele in prisoner swap”, 26 May](#)
2. [“Iran: One year after uprising international community must combat impunity for brutal crackdown”, 13 September](#)
3. [“Iran: New wave of brutal attacks against Baluchi protesters and worshippers”, 26 October](#)
4. [“Iran: Further information: Activist forcibly disappeared for over a year: Ebrahim Babaei”, 14 March](#)
5. [“Iran: International community must stand with women and girls suffering intensifying oppression”, 26 July](#)
6. [“Iran: Executions of tortured protesters must trigger a robust reaction from the international community,” 19 May](#)
7. [“Iran: Chilling execution spree with escalating use of death penalty against persecuted ethnic minorities”, 2 March](#)