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Statement on Responses to Human Rights Watch Report on Abuses by the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO)

In May 2005, Human Rights Watch issued a report on alleged human rights abuses committed by an Iranian opposition group, the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO/MEK),¹ inside its military camps in Iraq from 1991 to February 2003, prior to the fall of Saddam Hussein's government. The report, *No Exit: Human Rights Abuses Inside the MKO Camps*, detailed allegations by twelve former members of the MKO who told Human Rights Watch of a range of physical and psychological abuses they had suffered and witnessed.² In addition, the report made use of the published memoir of the MKO's former chief diplomatic representative in Europe and North America, Masoud Banisadr.³

Following publication of this Human Rights Watch report, individuals associated with the MKO and others, in communications to Human Rights Watch as well as publicly on Web sites connected with the MKO, raised objections to the findings of the report. We have investigated with care the criticisms we received concerning the substance and methodology of the report, and find those criticisms to be unwarranted.

A number of critics of the report claimed that Human Rights Watch was calling on the United States, Canada, and the European Union not to remove the MKO from their respective lists of groups identified as perpetrating or advocating acts of terrorism, in the face of a campaign by the MKO to have itself removed from such lists. Human Rights Watch in fact at no point, either in the report or in responses to media and other queries, took any position whatsoever on whether the MKO should be on such lists or removed from them. Rather, we did no more than report what we believed to be credible testimonies alleging serious abuses perpetrated by MKO officials against dissident members of the group, including prolonged deprivation of liberty and torture.

A group known as Friends of a Free Iran (FOFI), comprising four Members of the European Parliament – Alejo Vidal Quadras, Paulo Casaca, Andre Brie, and Struan Stevenson – presented the most extensive of the critiques of the *No Exit* report on September 21, 2005.⁴ The FOFI document disputed the testimonies and challenged the credibility of the witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch, saying, among other things, that their allegations were “widely believed to be orchestrated by Iran's Ministry of Intelligence.”⁵ The MKO has similarly alleged that Human Rights Watch's witnesses, and dissident former members generally, are in fact agents of Iranian intelligence. Neither FOFI nor any of the other critics of the Human Rights Watch report have provided any credible evidence to support this charge.

The FOFI document followed a five-day visit by a delegation of FOFI members to the MKO's main base in Iraq, Camp Ashraf, in July 2005. The FOFI delegation reportedly interviewed 19 MKO members inside Camp Ashraf. According to the FOFI document, these present MKO members disputed testimonies given by the former MKO members to Human Rights Watch. The FOFI delegation did not interview any of the individuals who gave testimonies to Human Rights Watch.

Because Human Rights Watch places a high premium on the accuracy of our reporting and public statements, the organization took these allegations seriously. We went back to our sources to review and reevaluate the credibility of their allegations. In October 2005 Human Rights Watch researchers met in person with all twelve witnesses quoted in the *No Exit* report. The researchers conducted interviews lasting several hours with each witness, individually and privately. All interviews were conducted in

Germany and the Netherlands, where the witnesses now live.

All of the witnesses recounted in extensive detail their experiences inside the MKO camps from the 1991-2003 period, and how MKO officials subjected them to various forms of physical and psychological abuses once they made known their wishes to leave the organization. Human Rights Watch researchers questioned the witnesses at great length about the circumstances under which these abuses allegedly took place. The researchers also asked the witnesses to respond to the specific issues raised in the FOFI document with regard to their testimonies. The witnesses provided detailed and credible responses to these challenges that were consistent with their earlier testimony as recounted in *No Exit* and are detailed in the appendix to this statement.

The only piece of information that emerged during these detailed face-to-face interviews that differed from the account in *No Exit* concerned the period of Mohammad Hussein Sobhani's detention by the MKO. In *No Exit*, Human Rights Watch reported that MKO officials had held Sobhani in solitary confinement for eight-and-a-half years, from September 1992 to January 2001. The FOFI document stated that "upon his own request, he [Sobhani] lived in an apartment furnished with all living commodities of a comfortable life. Despite PMOI's insistence that he must leave the organization, he was not willing to do so..."⁶

In his testimony in October 2005, Sobhani told Human Rights Watch that MKO officials held him continuously in solitary confinement from September 1992 until February 1998 inside Camp Ashraf, a period of five-and-a-half years. He said that in February 1998 the MKO leadership offered to transfer him to a better location and then to facilitate his transfer to Europe, where his daughter was living. Subsequently, the MKO moved Sobhani to another MKO camp near Baghdad, called Camp Parsian. He said he stayed there until June 1999, under circumstances that he described as "house arrest." He said he was free to leave his apartment in Camp Parsian but could not leave the camp unless accompanied by MKO guards, and could not leave for Europe. In June 1999, during a visit to Baghdad, he escaped and attempted to reach the United Nations office there. He was captured by the Iraqi police and turned over to MKO officials. From June 1999 until January 2001, Sobhani said, the MKO again held him in a prison inside Camp Ashraf, once again in solitary confinement. In January 2001, the MKO transferred Sobhani to Iraqi custody. The Iraqi authorities imprisoned him in Abu Ghraib until January 21, 2002.⁷

As reported by the witnesses interviewed for *No Exit*, the MKO transferred scores of dissident members from MKO detention into Iraqi custody. Iraqi authorities then incarcerated the men in Abu Ghraib prison. Five of the twelve individuals interviewed by Human Rights Watch for *No Exit* said they ended up in Abu Ghraib as a result of such transfers, and they told Human Rights Watch that former MKO members were being held there when they arrived. The FOFI document fails to address the MKO's transfer of the dissidents to Iraqi custody or their subsequent detention in Abu Ghraib.

The FOFI document also raised two other objections to the Human Rights Watch report. Firstly, the FOFI document questioned Human Rights Watch's methodology of conducting interviews with witnesses by phone. Human Rights Watch, like other organizations that conduct research and report on current affairs, sometimes relies on telephone interviews to gather information. Telephone interviews are a recognized and appropriate method of information gathering. Human Rights Watch has no reason to believe that any of the witnesses misidentified or misrepresented themselves in any way whatsoever. They reaffirmed their credibility in face to face interviews in October 2005.

Secondly, the FOFI document challenged Human Rights Watch's report by stating that, during their visit to Camp Ashraf, the FOFI delegation did not find any indications of abuse or ill-treatment of MKO members. The Human Rights Watch report, as was made clear in that text, covered allegations of abuse

inside the MKO camps prior to the overthrow of the government of Saddam Hussein in April 2003. The testimonies by witnesses who recounted allegations of detention and physical abuse cover the period from 1991 to February 2003. After the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, U.S. forces interviewed MKO members inside the MKO camps. The U.S. military set up a separate camp for those members who indicated that they wished to leave the organization. At least 300 members (out of a total of nearly 4000) chose to leave the organization. The Human Rights Watch report did not include any testimonies or allegations of witnesses as to whether there were ongoing abuses inside Camp Ashraf after the invasion of Iraq. Thus, the findings of FOFI with respect to current conditions in the MKO camp have no relevance to the Human Rights Watch report of testimonies about conditions in the camp from 1991 to February 2003.

Appendix

MKO members inside Camp Ashraf who the FOFI delegation interviewed disputed certain statements by the witnesses whose accounts appeared in the Human Rights Watch report. Human Rights Watch researchers questioned the witnesses at length concerning the allegations contained in the FOFI document.

Their responses, in the view of Human Rights Watch, confirm the credibility and reliability of their original testimonies in *No Exit*. The Human Rights Watch report contained allegations by witnesses that two MKO members, Ghorbanali Torabi and Parviz Ahmadi, died as a result of abuse suffered in MKO detention. The FOFI document challenged these testimonies.

- With regard to Ghorbanali Torabi's death, the FOFI delegation interviewed two MKO members in Camp Ashraf who disputed these testimonies. These two MKO members, Zahra Seraj, Torabi's wife, and Masoume Torabi, Torabi's sister, told the FOFI delegation that he had died of a heart attack, and not as a result of beatings at the hands of MKO officials. Neither of them claimed to have been present when he died. According to a communication to Human Rights Watch from Lord Avebury, who said he had interviewed Masouma Torabi by telephone on June 13, 2005, "Masouma saw Ghorbanali a week before he died."⁸
- Human Rights Watch again questioned Abbas Sedeghinejad, one of Human Right Watch's original sources on these events, about Torabi's death. Abbas Sadeghinejad confirmed his earlier testimony, based on his experience of sharing a prison cell with Torabi.⁹ He again told Human Rights Watch that late one night, after Torabi had been taken out of the cell for two days, two men carried Torabi back to the cell, threw him inside, and locked the cell again. Torabi, Sadeghinejad said, was not breathing and his face showed signs of severe beating. He said that other cellmates examined Torabi more closely and believed that he had suffered broken bones. Sadeghinejad acknowledged that Torabi may have died of a heart attack, but maintained that the MKO had severely beaten Torabi, apparently during interrogation.

Alireza Mir Asgari corroborated the fact of Torabi's detention and ill-treatment at the hands of the MKO, based on his own direct experience. Mir Asgari told Human Rights Watch that the MKO also detained him at the time Torabi was detained. He said that he knew Torabi well as a child in Iran, and that Torabi had recruited him in Tehran at the age of seventeen to join the MKO ranks in Iraq. Mir Asgari told Human Rights Watch that during his detention in 1995, he encountered Torabi face-to-face during an interrogation session. He said that the interrogators questioned them both about Torabi's motivation for recruiting Mir Asgari to the MKO camps in Iraq and accused them of working for the Iranian government. Mir Asgari said that when he met Torabi during this interrogation, Torabi's body showed signs of beatings and physical abuse.¹⁰

Mir Asgari told Human Rights Watch that when he raised the subject of Torabi's death with MKO leader Massoud Rajavi, Rajavi alternately responded that Torabi had committed suicide and that Mir Asgari and other prisoners had themselves killed Torabi because they suspected him of being an informant. He said Rajavi at no point claimed that Torabi had died from a heart attack.

- Concerning the death of Parviz Ahmadi, the FOFI delegation reported that Hossein Roboubi, an MKO member, told them that Ahmadi died during a military operation inside Iran.¹¹ In its report, Human Rights Watch cited the MKO's claim that Ahmadi was killed by Iranian agents.¹² Human Rights Watch also presented the testimony of three witnesses, Abbas Sadeghinejad, Ali Ghashghavi, and Alireza Mir Asgari, who said that they had shared a prison cell with Ahmadi and saw him die inside the prison after prison guards returned him from an interrogation session. During Human Rights Watch's face-to-face interviews in October 2005, each of these witnesses gave separate, detailed, and consistent accounts of their recollection regarding Ahmadi's death. These testimonies were consistent with their earlier statements as published in the *No Exit* report.¹³
- The FOFI document contains an interview with Hassan Ezati in Camp Ashraf. Hassan Ezati is the father of Yasser Ezati one of the witnesses quoted in the Human Rights Watch report. Hassan Ezati reportedly told the FOFI delegation that "Yasser having left Camp Ashraf went directly to the Iranian Embassy in Baghdad."¹⁴ When asked about this statement, Yasser Ezati strongly denied it. He said that he first went to the German Embassy in Baghdad because he had lived in Germany before moving to Iraq. He told Human Rights Watch that because the German Embassy was closed at the time, his only options were either to return to Camp Ashraf or to go to Iran. He said he was desperate not to return to Camp Ashraf because he had waited for so many years to find the opportunity to leave. He decided to risk returning to Iran for lack of any alternative. He told Human Rights Watch that he went to the Iranian border on his own. Yasser Ezati said that during his stay in Iran, the Iranian local police arrested him three times for "moral offenses." Yasser decided that because he had never lived in Iran previously he could not stay there and left for Germany.¹⁵
- The FOFI document contains an interview with Leila Ghanbari, an MKO member in Camp Ashraf who disputed the testimonies of Habib Khorrami, Tahereh Eskandari, and Mohammad Reza Eskandari in Human Rights Watch's report. Tahereh Eskandari and Habib Khorrami are sister and brother. Tahereh and Mohammad Reza Eskandari are married. Leila Ghanbari is the former wife of Habib Khorrami and had left Iran for Iraq with Khorrami and Tahereh Eskandari in 1988. The Human Rights Watch report quoted the Eskandaris as saying: "The organization had taken our passports and identification documents upon our arrival in the [MKO] camp [in Iraq]. When we expressed our intention to leave, they never returned our documents. We were held in detention centers in *Iskan* as well as other locations." Leila Ghanbari disputed this statement, telling the FOFI delegation: "In one place they say my passport was taken from me. Let me tell you that I laughed at this claim... What passport? They were escapees!"¹⁶ The FOFI authors state that MKO officials "said both Mohammad Reza Eskandari and Tahereh Eskandari crossed the border from Iran to Iraq and they never had passports to begin with."¹⁷

Human Rights Watch questioned Mohammad Reza Eskandari, Tahereh Eskandari, and Habib Khorrami separately regarding these allegations by Leila Ghanbari and the unnamed MKO officials. The Eskandaris and Khorrami separately told Human Rights Watch that Tahereh Eskandari, Habib Khorrami, and Leila Ghanbari left Iran together in March 1988 to go to Iraq, crossing the Turkish border and using their passports to do so. They said the MKO confiscated their passports and never returned them. Mohammad Reza Eskandari was the only member of

this family who escaped Iran without a passport across the Iraqi border. All three also noted in separate individual interviews that Leila Ghanbari was pregnant when she left Iran for Turkey, and that her and Habib Khorrami's son was born in Turkey. Habib Khorrami, Ghanbari's former husband and the boy's father, showed Human Rights Watch a copy of their son's birth certificate issued in Istanbul in April 1994 and stating the date of birth as June 13, 1988.

Leila Ghanbari also disputed the statements by these witnesses that the MKO had confined them in various MKO detention centers. Mohammad Reza Eskandari, Tahereh Eskandari, and Habib Khorrami, in separate face-to-face interviews again provided Human Rights Watch with detailed and consistent accounts of their confinement in various MKO detention centers.¹⁸

[1] Also known as People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI).

[2] <http://HumanRightsWatch.org/backgrounders/mena/iran0505/index.htm>

[3] Masoud Banisadr, *Memoirs of an Iranian Rebel* (London: Saqi Books, 2004).

[4] Thereport was presented on September 21 at a meeting in Brussels sponsored by the FOI, according to a September 23 press release on the website of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, an MKO-related group. The text of the FOI document later became available on the same website: <http://ncr-iran.org/images/stories/advertising/ep%20report-with%20cover.pdf>. Many of the points raised in the FOI document also were raised separately in correspondence addressed to Human Rights Watch by Lars Rise, a member of the Norwegian Parliament, and two members of the U.K. House of Lords, Lord Eric Avebury and Lord Gordon Slynn.

[5] FOI document, pg. 6.

[6] FOI document, pg. 65.

[7] Human Rights Watch interview with Mohammad Hussein Sobhani, Germany, October 4, 2005.

[8] Lord Avebury email to Human Rights Watch, June 15, 2005.

[9] Human Rights Watch interview with Abbas Sedeghinejad, Germany, October 2, 2005.

[10] Human Rights Watch interview with Alireza Mir Asgari, Germany, October 2, 2005.

[11] FOI document, pgs. 60-62.

[12] http://hrw.org/backgrounders/mena/iran0505/4.htm#_Toc103593132: "... the MKO's publication *Mojahed* of March 2, 1998, lists Parviz Ahmadi as an MKO 'martyr' killed by Iranian intelligence agents."

[13] Human Rights Watch interview with Abbas Sedeghinejad, Germany, October 2, 2005. Human Rights Watch interview with Alireza Mir Asgari, Germany, October 2, 2005. Human Rights Watch interview with Ali Ghashghavi, Germany, October 3, 2005. Their testimonies regarding Ahmadi's death appeared in *No Exit*, Pgs. 16-17.

[14] FOI document, p. 69.

[15] Human Rights Watch interview with Yasser Ezati, Germany, October 3, 2005.

[16] FOI document, p. 78.

[17] FOI document, p. 78.

[18] Human Rights Watch interview with Tahereh Eskandari, The Netherlands, October 6, 2005. Human Rights Watch interview with Mohammad Reza Eskandari, The Netherlands, October 6, 2005. Human Rights Watch interview with Habib Khorrami, The Netherlands, October 6, 2005.

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