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Iran: Crisis Deepening One Year After Disputed Elections

(New York) - Iran's government is tightening its grip, harassing, imprisoning, and using violence against its own people one year after the disputed 2009 presidential election and the start of its brutal crackdown, Human Rights Watch said today. The anniversary of the June 12, 2009 election falls two days after a meeting of the UN Human Rights Council, during which Iran defied criticisms of its human rights record.

Reports received by Human Rights Watch from human rights campaigners and others inside Iran suggest that the current atmosphere inside the country is markedly different than the images of mass protest beamed across airwaves and cyberspace a year ago. Public protest demonstrations have all but disappeared and dissent has largely gone underground as security forces have bolstered their presence in major cities throughout the country.

"While the international community has focused on Iran's nuclear ambitions, Tehran has been methodically crushing all forms of dissent inside the country," said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "Journalists, lawyers, and civil society activists who used to speak to foreign media and human rights groups are increasingly reluctant, fearing phone and internet surveillance."

According to a statement released by the Iranian judiciary, 250 people have been convicted for offenses related to election protests. Many received lengthy prison sentences following show trials at which they were forced to confess to security-related offenses. Hundreds of others remain in prison, with limited access to their lawyers or family members. Two dissidents were executed in January, and appellate courts recently confirmed the death sentences of at least six people accused of taking part in the post-election demonstrations.

The crackdown extends beyond election protesters. Since last June, the government has executed at least seven Kurdish political dissidents, all of whom were charged with the vaguely-defined crime of *moharebeh*, or "enmity against God." Today, more than a dozen Kurdish dissidents sit on death row [at imminent risk of execution](#). In addition, scores of opposition members, civil society activists, and dissidents who had not participated in the demonstrations were detained for various periods during the past year. Some were rearrested after their initial release.

Among the targets of the crackdown are journalists and human rights defenders,

presumably because of their skill at gathering information about abuses and communicating it both inside and outside the country. At least 37 journalists are in prison, with 19 more free on bail awaiting trial, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. An even larger number of journalists and defenders have fled Iran during the past year and live as refugees in neighboring Turkey.

Security forces have routinely harassed, arrested, and detained, often without charge, members of local human rights groups, including the Committee of Human Rights Reporters, the Student Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, and the Center for Defense of Human Rights, headed by the Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi. Other human rights defenders have been [swept up in raids](#) by security and intelligence units and face charges related to attempting to overthrow the government via "cyber-warfare."

In addition to targeting journalists and human rights defenders, security forces have mounted a multi-faceted campaign to restrict the flow of information via alternative information channels. Confronted with a massive volume of telecommunications traffic as ordinary Iranians used cell phones, email, and social media sites to disseminate timely reports of post-election events on the ground, the government responded by going after nontraditional media outlets. Human rights activists and media reports say that authorities have increasingly relied on sophisticated surveillance, filtering, and jamming technology to cause severe disruptions in the flow of information to and from Iran's cell phone, internet, and satellite users. When blocking access has not worked, authorities have simply shut or slowed down internet connections and telecommunications signals.

Despite numerous calls by human rights groups, Iranian civil society, and foreign governments for transparent and comprehensive investigations into the killings, arrests, abuse, and arbitrary detentions of demonstrators and activists, Iranian courts have not convicted any high-level government officials in connection with these abuses. In a [statement](#) issued in Geneva on Thursday, Human Rights Watch called on member states to hold the Iranian government accountable for its crackdown on civil society and for its inadequate response to recommendations that member states made to it in February, during the [Council's review](#) of Iran's rights record.

"On Thursday, June 10, Iran stood before the Human Rights Council and rejected the appeals of the international community to respect the rights of its citizens," Stork said. "As the noose around Iran's civil society draws ever tighter, governments need to act in unison to protest the alarming efforts to silence independent and dissident voices inside the country."

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