

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	354
Land:	Iran
Kilde:	Amnesty International
Titel:	"Amnesty International report 2007 the state of the world's human rights"
Udgivet:	6. august 2007
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	8. august 2007

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IRAN

Islamic Republic of Iran

Head of state: Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Ayatollah Sayed 'Ali Khamenei

Head of government: President: Dr Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

Death penalty: retentionist

International Criminal Court: signed

The human rights situation deteriorated, with civil society facing increasing restrictions on fundamental freedoms of expression and association. Scores of political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, continued to serve prison sentences imposed following unfair trials in previous years. Thousands more arrests were made in 2006, mostly during or following demonstrations. Human rights defenders, including journalists, students and lawyers, were among those detained arbitrarily without access to family or legal representation. Torture, especially during periods of pre-trial detention, remained commonplace. At least 177 people were executed, at least four of whom were under 18 at the time of the alleged offence, including one who was under 18 at the time of execution. Two people were reportedly stoned to death. Sentences of flogging, amputation and eye-gouging continued to be passed. The true numbers of those executed or subjected to corporal punishment were probably considerably higher than those reported.

Background

The rift between Iran and the international community over the government's insistence on maintaining its nuclear enrichment programme continued to widen. In March, the International Atomic Energy Agency referred Iran to the UN Security Council. In December the Security Council agreed on a programme of sanctions against Iran following Iran's failure to meet an August deadline to suspend the programme. Iran continued to accuse foreign governments of fomenting unrest in border areas, and in turn was accused of involvement in the worsening security situation in Iraq. In February the US government sought an extra

US\$75 million to "support democracy" in Iran. President Ahmadinejad continued to make statements threatening to the State of Israel and questioning the Holocaust. The European Union-Iran human rights dialogue remained suspended.

Local elections and elections to the Assembly of Experts, which oversees the appointment of the Supreme Leader, were held in December. The Council of Guardians, which reviews laws and policies to ensure that they uphold Islamic tenets and the Constitution, excluded all but 164 Assembly of Experts candidates, including at least 12 women who registered, on the basis of discriminatory selection procedures. The results of both elections were generally seen as a setback to the government of President Ahmadinejad.

The authorities faced armed opposition from Kurdish and Baluchi groups.

In December, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution condemning the human rights situation in Iran. Iran failed to set a date for visits by any UN Human Rights mechanisms despite having issued a standing invitation in 2002.

Repression of minorities

Ethnic and religious minorities remained subject to discriminatory laws and practices which continued to be a source of social and political unrest.

Arabs

Arabs continued to complain of discrimination, including in access to resources, as well as forced evictions. In October, the Council of Guardians approved a bill allocating 2 per cent of Iran's oil revenues to Khuzestan province, home to many of Iran's Arabs.

Scores of Arabs were detained during the year. At least 36 were sentenced to death or received lengthy prison terms after conviction in unfair trials of involvement in causing bomb explosions in Ahvaz and Tehran in 2005. Five were executed including Mehdi Nawaseri and Mohammad Ali Sawari who were executed in public in February following the broadcast of their televised "confessions".

- At least five women were detained, some along with their children, between February and April, in circumstances which suggested that they may have been held in order to force their husbands to give themselves up or make confessions. Four women and two children were believed to be still held at the end of the year.
- Seven lawyers defending some of those accused in connection with the bombings were summoned to appear before the Ahvaz Revolutionary Prosecutor in October on charges of "acting against state security". The summons was issued in connection with a letter they had sent to the Head of the Revolutionary Court in Ahvaz complaining about deficiencies in the trial of their clients.

Azerbaijanis

In May, widespread demonstrations took place in mainly Azerbaijani north-western towns and cities in protest at the publication of a cartoon offensive to Azerbaijanis in the state-run Iran newspaper. Hundreds, if not thousands, were arrested and scores reportedly killed by the security forces, although official sources downplayed the scale of arrests and killings. Further arrests occurred, many around events and dates significant to the Azerbaijani community such as the Babek Castle gathering in Kalayber in June, and a boycott of the start of the new academic year over linguistic rights for the Azerbaijani community.

- Prisoner of conscience Abbas Lisani was detained in June for over three months for his participation in the demonstrations in Ardabil against the cartoon. In September, he was sentenced to 16 months' imprisonment and 50 lashes on charges including "disturbing state security". At the end of October, five days after submitting an appeal, he was redetained, and his family was later informed that his sentence had been increased to 18 months' imprisonment with an additional three years of enforced internal exile. He stated his unconditional opposition to the use of violence. By the end of the year he faced two further prison sentences imposed for his attendance at the 2003 and 2005 Babek Castle gatherings.

Kurds

In February, clashes between Kurdish demonstrators and the security forces in Maku and other towns reportedly led to at least nine deaths and scores, if not hundreds, of arrests. In March, Kurdish Majles deputies wrote to the President demanding an investigation into the killings and calling for those responsible to be brought to justice. An investigation was reportedly set up, but its findings were not known by the end of the year. Some of those detained later reportedly received prison terms of between three and eight months.

- Mohammad Sadeq Kabudvand, the Head of the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan and editor of the banned weekly newspaper Payam-e Mardom, had his 18-month suspended prison sentence for "publishing lies and articles aimed at creating racial and tribal tension and discord" increased on appeal to one year's actual imprisonment. Although summoned to prison in September, he remained at liberty at the end of the year, pending an appeal to the Supreme Court. Other Payam-e Mardom journalists were also brought to trial.

Baluchis

In March a Baluchi armed group, Jondallah, killed 22 Iranian officials and took at least seven hostage, in Sistan-Baluchistan province. Following the incident, scores, possibly hundreds, of people were arrested; many were reportedly taken to unknown locations. In the months following the attacks, the number of executions announced in Baluchi areas increased dramatically. Dozens were reported to have been executed by the end of the year.

Religious minorities

Members of Iran's religious minorities were detained or harassed on account of their faith.

In February over 1,000 Nematollahi Sufis peacefully protesting against an order to evacuate their place of worship in Qom were arrested. Hundreds were injured by members of the security forces and members of organized pro-government groups. In May, 52 Sufis, including two lawyers representing the group, were sentenced to one year's imprisonment, flogging and a fine, and the lawyers were banned from practising law. In August, Grand Ayatollah Fazel Lankarani issued a religious edict designating Sufism as "null and void".

Several evangelical Christians, mostly converts from Islam, were detained, apparently in connection with their religious activities.

- In September, Fereshteh Dibaj and her husband, Reza Montazemi, were detained for nine days before being released on bail. Fereshteh Dibaj is the youngest daughter of convert Mehdi Dibaj who was murdered in 1994 shortly after being released from prison where he had been held for nine years for "apostasy".

Sixty-five Baha'is were detained during 2006 and five remained held at the end of the year. In March Mehran Kawsari was released early from his three-year prison sentence imposed in connection with an open letter sent to the then President in November 2004.

In March, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief expressed concern about an October 2005 letter instructing various government agencies to identify, and collect information about, Baha'is in Iran.

Human rights defenders

Human rights defenders faced deepening restrictions on their work and remained at risk of reprisals. In January, the Ministry of the Interior was reported to be preparing measures to restrict the activities of non-governmental organizations that allegedly received finance from "problematic internal and external sources aimed at overthrowing the system". Students, who remained a politically active section of society, were frequently targeted for reprisals, including arbitrary arrest and denial of the right to study in the new academic year.

- In August, the Ministry of the Interior banned activities by the Centre for Defenders of Human Rights (CDHR), run by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi and other leading lawyers, stating that it did not have a permit. In September, the Ministry of the Interior said a permit would be issued "if changes were made to the [centre's] mission statement".

- Abdolfattah Soltani, a lawyer and co-founder of the CDHR, was released on bail in March. He was later sentenced to five years' imprisonment for "disclosing confidential documents" and "propaganda against the system". The sentence was under appeal at the end of the year.

- Prisoner of conscience Akbar Ganji, a journalist who implicated government officials in the murder of intellectuals and journalists in the 1990s, was released in March after completing his six-year prison sentence.

Torture and cruel, inhuman and

degrading punishments

Torture remained common in many prisons and detention centres, particularly in the investigative stage of pre-trial detention when detainees are denied access to a lawyer for indefinite periods. At least seven people reportedly died in custody, some in circumstances where torture, ill-treatment or denial of medical care may have been contributory factors.

- Political prisoners Akbar Mohammadi and Valiollah Feyz Mahdavi died in July and September respectively after going on hunger strike to protest at their continued detention.

- Fourteen-year-old Mohammad Reza Evezpoor, an Iranian Azerbaijani, was arrested in April after writing "I am a Turk" on a wall. He was reportedly tortured during his three days in detention, including by being suspended by his feet for 24 hours and denied food and water. He was beaten again when rearrested in September.

At least two amputations were carried out and one person was sentenced to eye-gouging. Flogging remained a common punishment.

- Leyla Mafi received a flogging of 99 lashes in February before being released from prison into a women's rehabilitation centre. Forced into prostitution as an eight-year-old and raped repeatedly, she was arrested in early 2004 and charged with "acts contrary to chastity" for which she was sentenced to flogging followed by death. Following international pressure, her death sentence was overturned.

Impunity

Victims of human rights violations and their families continued to lack redress.

- A re-examination, ordered in 2001, of the cases of Ministry of Intelligence officials accused of the 1998 "serial murders", remained incomplete. Nasser Zarafshan, lawyer for the families of some of the victims, continued to serve a five-year prison sentence following his conviction on politically motivated charges.

Death penalty

At least 177 people were executed in 2006, including one minor and at least three others who were under 18 at the time of the alleged offence. Death sentences were imposed for a variety of crimes including drug smuggling, armed robbery, murder, political violence and sexual offences. Following domestic and international protests, the death sentences of some women and of some prisoners aged under 18 at the time of the alleged offence were suspended or lifted; some were sentenced to death again after a retrial. Two people were reportedly stoned to death despite a moratorium on stoning announced by the judiciary in 2002. Others remained under sentence of stoning to death. In September, Iranian human rights defenders launched a campaign to save nine women and two men sentenced to death by stoning and to abolish stoning in law. By the end of the year the stoning sentences of at least three of the 11 had been quashed.

Freedom of expression and association

Freedom of expression and association was increasingly curtailed. Internet access was increasingly restricted and monitored. Journalists and webloggers were detained and sentenced to prison or flogging and at least 11 newspapers were closed down. Relatives of detainees or of those sought by the authorities remained at risk of harassment or intimidation. Independent trade unionists faced reprisals and some academics, such as Ramin Jahanbegloo, were detained or dismissed from their posts.

- Up to 1,000 members of the independent, but banned, Sherkat-e Vahed Bus Company Union were arrested in January after striking to demand recognition of their union and to protest at the detention of the union's head Mansour Ossanlu. All were later released, but dozens were still forbidden from returning to their jobs at the end of the year. Mansour Ossanlu was released on bail in August after being held for over seven months in connection with his trade union activities, but was redetained for one month in November, reportedly after attending meetings organized by the International Labour Organization.

Women's rights

Demonstrations in Tehran in March and June demanding an end to discrimination in law against women were broken up harshly by the security forces. Some protesters were injured.

- Former Majles deputy Sayed Ali Akbar Mousavi-Kho'ini was arrested at the June demonstration and held for over four months before his release on bail in October. He reported that he had been tortured in detention.

In August, women's rights activists launched a campaign to gather a million signatures to a petition demanding equal rights for women.

AI country reports/visits

Reports

- Iran: Human rights defender at risk ? appeal case: Abdolfattah Soltani (AI Index: MDE 13/009/2006)
- Iran: New government fails to address dire human rights situation (AI Index: MDE 13/010/2006)
- Iran: Defending minority rights ? the Ahwazi Arabs (AI Index: MDE 13/056/2006)

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