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Iran admits prisoner died from abuse

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For the first time since June's post-election riots, the Iranian government appears to have admitted that a prisoner died from abuse suffered at the hands of prison authorities.

The semi-official news service, Mehr News Agency, reported on Monday that Mohsen Ruhlomani died from "physical stress, conditions of imprisonment, repeated blows and harsh physical treatment".

Authorities had at first blamed his death on meningitis picked up at Kahrizak jail where he was being held, but his father - an adviser to conservative opposition politician Mohsen Rezaie - said his son's body showed signs of having been beaten.

Ruhlomani was arrested in the wake of anti-government demonstrations following the disputed re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad earlier this year.

"Thousands" detained

Renee Redman is the Executive Director of US based Iran Human Rights Documentation Center. She says it's impossible to know how many protestors were arrested and are still being detained:

"The only way is to start with the government's number and piece together reports from other people when they hear about people being picked up. The government has said that they've detained only a few hundred. It's probable that thousands are still detained. The last I heard, about 3,000 or 4,000 were detained in Tehran and, of course, there probably are people detained around the country as well."

And while it's difficult to communicate with people within Iran at the moment, Redman says that past experience suggests the protestors aren't being treated well.

"I think it's fair to say they're being treated like all political opposition figures and they're being tortured and they're being questioned, with the goal of having them confess to basically trumped up charges. In our reporting and research over the years, the patterns remain the same in the way that prisoners are treated by the Islamic Republic - especially political prisoners. People are arrested, sometimes not charged for years and yet they're still held in prison. They are interrogated very brutally, often rising to the level of torture, their families are harassed, often people do die from their interrogations and many times the goal is to have people confess, publicly, on television, which we're seeing a little bit of right now."

Prison closure

Monday's report, however, is seen by some Iran watchers as part of a strategy intended to calm on-going tensions in the country.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khameni, closed down the Kahrizak prison and assured Mr. Ruhlomani's family that those responsible for his death would be held accountable. Parliament has also started an investigation into allegations of prisoner abuse.

Khameni also appointed moderate Ayatollah Sadegh Ardishir Larijani to head the country's judiciary. Larijani in turn fired Saeed Mortazavi - the hard-line prosecutor behind the on-going trials of political opponents - and replaced him with the more moderate Abbas Jaafari Dowlatabadi.

International attention

The international community also needs to be paying attention to the situation, says Renee Redman, particularly now that the situation in Iran is no longer headline news.

"In our opinion, the international community should still have this on the front burner. It's very important that the Islamic Republic knows that it's being watched and that it's being monitored."

Rape

Meanwhile, Iranian opposition leader Mehdi Karroubi is charging that some young men and women detained during the election unrest were raped in prison. One of the victims has now disappeared after being interrogated, his website reported Wednesday.

Iranian officials have dismissed claims that protestors were raped while in custody.

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