

Iran and a human rights guarantee

By Paul Taylor

TEHRAN (Reuter) -- The human rights which the Iranian revolution was meant to guarantee, many of them contained in the country's Islamic constitution, are in danger from uncontrolled groups of Moslem fundamentalists.

That is the view of veteran human rights lawyer Abdolkarim Lahiji. It is shared by many of the liberal and leftist intellectuals who were jailed and sometimes tortured under the deposed Shah's rule.

"The constitution guarantees a wide range of freedom of expression, publication, religion and freedom from arbitrary arrest, but in practice those freedoms are violated every day by uncontrolled elements," Dr. Lahiji said in an interview.

"If liberty cannot be assured

by social guarantees, then it is as if there were no freedom at all," he added.

According to Lahiji, the main authors of unconstitutional human rights violations are the "hezbollahi" -- literally "followers of the party of God" -- who form street groups to attack demonstrations, burn book stalls and assault the offices of newspapers and political groups.

Vigilante groups

Throwing stones and often wielding knives, chains and clubs, the hezbollahi regularly disrupt authorized demonstrations of the radical Islamic Mujahedin movement and other leftist groups.

Revolutionary guards, responsible for ensuring law and order at such gatherings, rarely make any effort to stop the squads.

The independent Bamdad newspaper, the largest publication not controlled by the ruling clergy, has been attacked three times by groups of hezbollahi, who last year closed several liberal and left-leaning newspapers.

"It got so bad at one stage that we closed down because the authorities could not guarantee our security," said one Bamdad journalist.

"Now, we are open again but we have to be very cautious in what we write."

Article 32 of Iran's new constitution states that "unless otherwise prescribed by law, no one can be arrested arbitrarily. When an arrest is made, the accused must be immediately informed of the reasons for the arrest."

Despite this, Islamic vigilante groups, who often arrest without warrants, hold people for weeks without authorization and in many cases appear to be answerable to nobody.

Right to publish

Revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini has banned the arrest of people without a warrant, but the practice persists.

"In the first weeks of the revolution, this was understandable, if not legally acceptable, but now it is indefensible and unconstitutional," Lahiji said.

The right to publish a newspaper, although upheld in the constitution, in fact depends on a lengthy

bureaucratic procedure designed to silence vociferous opponents of the authorities.

For months the authorities turned a blind eye to the proliferation of leftist papers appearing without a license.

When leftist paper sellers were beaten up or occasionally splashed with acid by hezbollahi, officials shrugged off the incidents.

But now revolutionary prosecutor Ayatollah Ali Ghodussi has taken a harder line against the leftists. He recently banned 40 left-wing newspapers and threatened jail terms of three to six months for anyone caught selling them.

Iran's religious minorities provide another example where constitutional freedoms are unevenly enforced in practice.

Token steps

The authorities have taken no more than token steps to counter an apparent assault on the country's tiny Anglican Church community.

Bahram Dehgani, son of the Anglican bishop of the Middle East, was shot dead in broad daylight in a Tehran street.

It was the culmination of six months of attacks on Bishop Dehgani, now in exile in Cyprus, his family and aides.

His English secretary, Jean Waddell, was shot and seriously wounded only a week earlier.

Four members of the Armenian Christians community, arrested for distributing leaflets on April 24, the anniversary of an Armenian massacre in Turkey in 1915, had disappeared without trace, an Armenian lawyer said.

Members of the Jewish community, who also enjoy constitutional protection, say they are alarmed at a recent spate of revolutionary trials of Jewish businessmen on charges ranging from corruption to Jewish activism.

"If somebody is corrupt, that is one thing. But if they are saying that it is a revolutionary offense to host a meeting of the Jewish society in your home or business, that's something different and very dangerous," a Jewish trader commented.

Lahiji said the minority in greatest danger was the Baha'i community, followers of a dissident sect of Islam, who have no constitutional rights.

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