

Iran: Basij member describes election abuse

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By Channel 4 News

A defecting member of the infamous Basij militia, the men who wounded and killed in the aftermath of the Iran elections in the summer, talks to Lindsey Hilsum about what he witnessed.

"I've lost my world and I've lost my religion" - the words of a former Iranian Basij militia member who says he witnessed killings and tried to stop rapes [during the uprising](#) that followed the [disputed Presidential election](#) in June.

After [months of stories](#) by witnesses and victims, we are now getting a picture of what went on by a man who claims he was part of the group ordered to carry out attacks.

He is now seeking refuge in the UK and has spoken exclusively to Channel 4 News about the orders the Basij were given to ensure President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the election.

In [her blog](#), [Lindsey Hilsum wrote](#): "Maybe the most convincing authentication we have is that his story confirms the reports we've had from victims and human rights groups, who say rape has been used all over Iran in the brutal months since the June election. That and his desperation. Rarely have I interviewed someone so distressed."

Lindsey Hilsum's report contains flash photography.

Election orders

"In truth the orders didn't come after the election. The orders for all that you witnessed came before the election.

"We were prepared. But we didn't ever imagine that people's actions would be so great. We had received orders regarding student activities.

"From three or four months before the election we had attended classes on ideological and political thought and crowd control.

"We knew what we had to do but nothing prepared us for what we saw. There were severe clashes in the first few days, and so new orders were given for forthcoming days."

Religious dilemma

"I'm in complete turmoil all the time. I spent more than twenty years raised like this, and before me a household of martyrs. I keep thinking, which is right? What I've chosen now, or the path they've taken.

"Our family is no small undertaking. It has many martyrs. My uncle was martyred with Mr D, Mr AHD.

"We are a prominent religious family - always there on the frontline, always with memories of war, frontline and revolution. Since these events I keep thinking, who is right?"

Election build-up

"From three or four months before I had a social undertaking, preparing to see how people would encounter the elections, the level of attendance - would it be well received, do they believe in it, do they think something could still be done?"

"It was going well even though they spoke of Khatami (reformist former president) coming, and then he wasn't coming. All this created excitement. People came with genuine enthusiasm.

"We got various statistics and analysed them. We wanted to get an idea of what the mode of clashes
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would be.

"When the campaigns began the excitement reached a new height.

"We had received orders a matter of months before that there is jurisprudence, that there is the jurisprudence of the Imam Zaman, (the 13th Imam, who is expected to return like a Messiah) whose incarnation is Ayatollah Khamenei, and that he had announced that for the advancement and development of Islam and the development of the revolution no-one could be more effective than Mr. Ahmadinejad.

"Therefore the order came that Mr Khamenei has him in mind, that Mr Khamenei has Mr Ahmadinejad in mind for the presidency and so he must be announced as the winner.

"It's he who is best suited to this revolution, order and Velayat Faqih (Iranian system of Islamic jurisdiction)"

"Scary and horrifying"

"I was extremely taken aback. How can I explain? This is someone who I couldn't even entertain a conflicting thought against.

"It was truly a scary and horrifying scenario to go against wishes or opinion, especially if that opinion belongs to the Supreme Leader or that of the Velayat Faqih, for you to express a personal opinion.

"It was a terrible situation. On the one side I saw the people and on the other there was the order."

Ballot box fraud

"The answers to your questions go back to before the elections. In the private meeting we had for those responsible for the ballot boxes, including my brother and me, it was made clear.

"The orders were announced as to how everything would be conducted on the day of the election. We were among those responsible for the ballot boxes."

Role of the Basij

"I don't know how much you know about the Basij but it is an extremely vast organ, much more extensive than you would imagine.

"Although you may think that it is without formal organisation, it is in fact very precise and extremely organised with sophisticated planning and everything is specified.

"When an order is received, or when the Supreme Leader has announced his opinion, well, Mr D is the spokesman of the leader and we are Mr D's spokespeople.

"The foundations of Islam and the foundations of Shi'ism and Velayat are such that we have accepted the Velayat. When the Velayat has an opinion, everyone's opinion must follow, because if it's outside of this there is no place for you. You're an outsider.

"He [Khamenei] makes his announcement and Mr D translates this in the form of advice and discussion.

"Everything has a hierarchy. It doesn't call for Mr Khamenei to come and directly make an announcement to the soldiers, when I say soldier, I, or we, saw ourselves as soldiers of the Imam Zaman.

"He doesn't need to come and make his announcement to the forces directly, he expresses his opinion and according to the hierarchical system, the news will reach those who need to hear it.

"Mr D's opinion is an absolute obedience of the Supreme Leader. We've been told this in meetings.

"In the private meeting I mentioned to you, the commanders of the Sepah (Revolutionary Guard) were present as well as those of various Basij units from different areas.

"It was imperative to have the leader's vision, and it was announced then that his vision is this, that he

elects Ahmadinejad."

Election fraud

"For us who were responsible for the ballot boxes the order was this: that Aqa's [Khamenei's] wish is for Ahmadinejad to win.

"For illiterate people and those not able to complete their ballots, you must do so for them and complete them accordingly (for Ahmadinejad), no matter who their vote was intended for.

"Same with blank votes. In the counting the blank votes wouldn't be announced as void.

"They [the illiterate] were generally made up of elderly men and women - and they are great believers in the mosque community and religious matters and areas where there is a lower literacy rate like the villages or areas of the big cities."

Youth vote suppressed

"Our problem was the young people and university students, we had prepared for the others.

"Well they [the students] weren't around for the count. When they left, how can I say, I'm very ashamed now, but they just came up to the box and then left.

"After the voting was over it was only us who were there. We were honest in that the command was followed.

"When the voting was over, the boxes were opened, but not all of them.

"A few were opened and counted, then we received another order to send the boxes to the main centre."

Stopping the protests

"Because a reaction was expected, we had been ordered from before the election for all security forces to be ready for the following day.

"They told us to come early for group prayers. We went along with others who'd been invited. Prayers took place. This was followed by a short speech confirming Mr Ahmadinejad's victory and the congratulations in order.

"Sweets and pastries were offered and the forces were organised into two shifts.

"There were areas that had been previously noted as problem areas - we called them the red points - where security presence was essential.

"These were announced, the shifts were determined and everyone was deployed. It was early.

"We had set out very early before anyone could get started. Everyone took their positions and were armed.

"The command was that we were to prevent any gathering of people to take shape.

Violent suppression

"Any hint of protest was to be firmly suppressed. If anything occurred, to attack.

"Attacking people meant nothing. As I told you, anyone who thought differently to Ayatollah Khamenei and outside of the Velayat Faqih was considered an outsider.

"Therefore his protest has no place, therefore his opinion and protest is meaningless.

"It was simple. It was not for us to think anything of them - both voters and protesters.

"In our view, it was not a protest against the issue but a protest against Ayatollah Khamenei himself.

"And it's just not comprehensible to us that someone should want to question him. He is our guide."

Controlling the city

"On that day in this area there were batons, and cables that coil and extend easily. If it attaches to someone's hand and you pull it you can do serious harm.

"Sprays like pepper sprays. Some were given handcuffs. Yes, we went prepared.

"Everything went according to plan because everything had been thought through.

"The vehicles came on time, breakfast, prayers, all on time. The city was under our control."

"Unprecedented" clashes

"Because I had been in charge at the polling station the night before, I was on the afternoon shift. I went home to rest and then came back in the afternoon.

"When I came back I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I never thought. It was unbelievable. The level of clashes was severe.

"This was unprecedented. I had witnessed attacks before but never at this level. People wouldn't stay back, they couldn't be suppressed and we were really in trouble.

"As I said, I had issues with everything that had unfolded and was confused. I really didn't want to get involved. But I had to be there. I didn't have the right to say I didn't want to be there. My physical presence was required.

"The clashes were very heavy. The forces were seriously involved and the people wouldn't give in or retreat in any way. There was no end in sight.

"They would be dispersed then gather again and come back. They were standing up to us.

"I wasn't one of the ordinary forces to have to involve myself in the situation. I could have, but I also had the choice not to.

"People like me who were supervising and observing and reporting back could just stand there. I stood there silently by my colleagues.

"As I talk to you now everything comes back to me. It's very hard. I still can't fathom it all. Why did it have to be like this?"

Permission to shoot

"The first day was very hard for us. When we all got back to the base that night, the commanders gave their reports from the various areas of the city.

"We were told that there would be new orders for the following days. The order came to attack everyone without restraint or mercy regardless of age. Anyone who was in disagreement.

"It was made clear, there was to be no difference between child or adult, men and women. Proper attack, without warning, or any discussion.

"This was very strange to me. Everything was surreal. This was not trivial.

"We had permission to shoot. We were all to be armed. We were supposed to support the police and security forces.

"The next day it seemed that people like us were prepared. They were ready too, and there were more of them. Just as we were prepared, they were too."

"Watch people die"

"On the second day, I don't know how to say it, it's so painful to me, talking about it is hard, the memory of it is awful...the wounded, and those who died.

"It's really hard to stand there and watch people die. I had to stand there. I had no choice.

"No [I did not kill anyone], I only accompanied others. I was trying not to get involved at all.

"They had prepared a hospital for the wounded and dead. It was a Basij hospital. It was very hard. If there was an issue with killing, it was explained that the killing was for a cause and was a good deed.

"I saw one person killed on the street but in the hospital there were many many more than was seen on the streets - from all parts of the city.

"Because the directive had been given, permission had been granted. It was intolerable."

Unspeakable things

"It's from then that things got even worse. We were all strangers. Orders and commands were followed. Clashes took every shape and form.

"How can I say. some of the things are unspeakable. I can't mentally and ideologically fathom what's happened.

"In the clashes, anyone who was wounded would be arrested. If they couldn't catch them they'd get someone else. They would arrest anyone they could.

"It made no difference who it was. Wounded, not wounded. If they were activists, all the better. Young children, young adults.

"The treatment of them - the mode of attack and length of attack on them left me in shock."

Arrest orders

"The command was to arrest as many 12-18 year olds as possible and bring them back.

"This group caused the most trouble so the idea was not to give them any opportunity to congregate. Many were arrested.

"Again, several locations had been prepared to take them and keep them there.

"The night I was there, I followed my brother there. I hadn't seen him for several days as we'd been caught up in everything. I have a lot of respect for him and love him dearly.

"Since we were children we've always done everything together. We're like twins. He said, I'll be there tonight. Come there and we'll go home together.

Sound of screams

"They had some containers ready. They had arrested some youngsters and were asking them their age and were separating them accordingly.

"Over 18s went into to one container and the under 18s into the several other containers. The number of children under the age of 18 was greater. They filled three or four containers of some 25 people in each.

"I saw all this and passed them on my way into the main courtyard building to see my relative. I greeted him and other friends.

"Then we heard noise from the yard. We thought it must be the youngsters making trouble. We went there and saw there was no-one, just the forces. The sound came from the containers.

"The sound of screams and pleading and crying. We didn't understand what was going on.

"They were pleading: 'We're sorry, please, we regret our actions'. Or screams, or crying. We were confused. I couldn't believe that they would want to do such a thing: to rape."

Sexual violence

"This is such a heavy burden, my head hurts. But you're a woman. I'm sure you understand. Can you give me some time?"

"It's as if it's replaying in front of me.

"The faces, the screams are with me every moment. It's not something you can forget or separate yourself from.

"They were pleading, they were crying, they wanted help, but my brother is a more senior authority than me. We went to see what was happening.

"There were two men of the Sepah and they came forward as we approached.

"We asked what all the noise was about. They said "Nothing, this is Fath ol Moin (aid to victory).

"We said: 'What do you mean, what are you doing? Who's in there?'

"Because they were Basij from the provinces we didn't know them. We asked: 'What's happening, why are they crying?'

"As we pursued the matter the confrontation got worse and they said 'You have no right to enter.' My relative said: 'What do you mean? I'm one of the leaders here. You can't tell me I have no right.'

"And it really was so, but they didn't allow us entry. We were all responsible and we clashed. After a few minutes a vehicle came into the courtyard.

"Someone must have alerted the others that we were trying to prevent them from achieving what they set out to do, the Fath ol Moin.

"They had come for us to prevent the scene from deteriorating. They said our superior had summoned us.

"They said: 'Let's go. He wants to speak to you.' When we got there he was visibly furious, very frustrated. He didn't speak.

"They said: "Let's go. Haji wants to speak to you." My relative was furious and very frustrated.

"He was very angry. When we got there he said: 'What is this? Sexual abuse is a serious crime. Who gave this order? Who authorised this?'

"Haji calmly replied with a smile: 'This is Fath Al Moin. It's a worthy deed. There's nothing wrong with it. Why are you complaining?'

"When he said this Haji thought it would calm my relative down to know this. But the opposite happened, he became more upset. He raised his voice saying: 'What do you mean it's not a crime?'

"What do you mean it's not a recognised crime? That it's a good deed? Haji saw that he had lost control and said: 'What's the big deal? Nothing's happened. What is the issue here?'

"My relative said again: 'What do you mean what's the big deal? Is there anything more filthy than this, more ugly than this? With children, these are children, they haven't done anything. They're from our own home town.'

"Haji saw that he couldn't control him, that he wanted to return to the base and stop what was going on.

"He said: 'You can stay here for now. Tomorrow we'll have a meeting about it, we can discuss it and see what the issue is.'

"I insisted on staying with him. But Haji said: 'You go and rest and we'll get him home. You go, the driver will take you home and wait there. We'll call you.'

"They dropped me home and my relative stayed there."

Pain and shame

"The pain and the shame in front of people and before God. I've lost my world and my religion.

"I never thought that these matters could be contaminated like this.

"I thought that I was continuing the path of my uncles and our martyrs. All my interest and enthusiasm: to have the integrity for martyrdom.

"We really saw ourselves as upstanding and separate from others. We really believed that what we did was correct, that we were serving the people, that we were serving God and that our mission was nothing but worshipping God.

"But now I am ashamed in front of people, even say that I was mistaken, and I am ashamed in front of my religion. I committed crimes, knowingly and unknowingly.

"Now I'm left with my conscience punishing me for what I did.

"I hope that God and people forgive me."

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