

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Iran: Iran must allow peaceful gatherings during 'Ashoura

Amnesty International has urged the Iranian authorities to ensure that freedom to gather peacefully is assured during 'Ashoura religious celebrations this month.

"Iran's government must make 'Ashoura the time to end the practice of preventing peaceful demonstrations - including by making pre-emptive, arbitrary arrests - and ensure that excessive force is not used in the event that those taking part in 'Ashoura commemorations gather to voice their opposition to the government," said Malcolm Smart, Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa programme.

"We call on the Supreme Leader to ensure that no one faces arrest or the batons of plain-clothed Basij for merely taking part in a peaceful demonstration on such a solemn occasion."

Amnesty International has repeatedly condemned mounting repression of dissent in Iran and the excessive use of force.

It has called for the Basij not to be used in the policing of demonstrations on account of the violence they have meted out against those taking part in ongoing demonstrations.

Protests have continued since the disputed June election, sometimes on days marking other events of national significance.

'Ashoura, the tenth day of Islam's lunar month of Moharram, is a solemn Shi'a Muslim religious occasion marking the killing, or martyrdom, in 680 of Hossein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad and an important religious and community leader. It will be marked by a national holiday in Iran on 26 and 27 December

Background

The most recent of the continuing protests against the government in Iran took place during the funeral of Grand Ayatollah Hosseinali Montazeri, held on 21 December in Qom.

Grand Ayatollah Hosseinali Montazeri was nominated by Ayatollah Khomeini to succeed him as Leader but his nomination was cancelled in 1989 after he called for the legalisation of political parties and protested against the pre-planned, mass killing of mainly left-wing detainees in 1988. Amnesty International had campaigned for the release of Hosseinali Montazeri during his 1974-1976 incarceration under the Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran. In a condolence speech after his death, Nobel peace prize laureate, Shirin Ebadi, called Grand Ayatollah Montazeri the 'father of human rights in Iran'

In an Urgent Action appeal, Amnesty International called for the release of at least five people, including three human rights activists, detained the night before the funeral of Grand Ayatollah Hosseinali Montazeri.

Reports suggest that following the funeral, attended by thousands of mourners, there were a series of confrontations between security forces and participants while Basij personnel surrounded offices of Grand Ayatollah Yousef Saanei, who attended the funeral, and beat up

members of his staff. In Esfahan, security personnel are said to have blocked the mosque where commemorations were to have been held for the late Grand Ayatollah, leading to confrontation.

Mourners were reportedly beaten and some 50 people arrested. Security forces are also reported to have surrounded the residence of Ayatollah Taheri, another clerical leader who has expressed opposition to state policies. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance is reported to have imposed sweeping restrictions on what media outlets were permitted to report about the death of Grand Ayatollah Montazeri.

Amnesty International condemns the excessive use of force by Iranian security forces that saw scores of protesters beaten and detained on 7 December, Iran's national student day, during student-led demonstrations. In a number of instances, security forces - including the volunteer Basij militia - used batons and tear gas to disperse opposition supporters in the wake of threats by officials that all demonstrations would be considered illegal and met by force.

Since the announcement that incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won the 12 June election, which many people disputed, Iran has seen a series of demonstrations against the government. In the course of the unrest, the authorities have acknowledged 36 deaths, while the opposition claims that over 70 died. Over 4,000 were arrested, many of whom were tortured or otherwise ill-treated in detention centres across the country. Some have alleged they were raped, although the authorities initially denied this after cursory investigations and other measures which appear designed to hide, rather than uncover, the truth. Nevertheless, reports suggest that three officials have been charged with murder in connection with deaths in custody. Over 80 people have been sentenced to prison terms or flogging in connection with the unrest, including those sentenced after mass "show trials" which began in August. At least five have been sentenced to death.

The pattern of repression that has emerged following the June 2009 election continues to deepen. Reports on 21 December 2009 state that a meeting for members of the House of Parties, an association providing a forum for matters relating to the administration of political groups was prevented from going ahead, after which an official from the Ministry of the Interior announced that its license had expired in 2004, despite the organisation having held one of its meetings in October 2009, in the ministry itself.

For further information about the post-election events please see Iran: Election contested, Repression compounded (Index MDE 13/123/2009), December 2009, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/123/2009/en>

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