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Iran opposition claims jailed protesters raped



by Jay Deshmukh

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TEHRAN (AFP) – An Iranian opposition leader has claimed that women and boys detained over the wave of unrest that swept the nation after the disputed presidential election were savagely raped in custody.

The allegations by defeated presidential candidate Mehdi Karroubi surfaced as Iran hit back at Western criticism of its mass trials of protesters, including British and French embassy staff.

"A number of detainees have said that some female detainees have been raped savagely. Young boys held in detention have also been savagely raped," Karroubi said in a letter to powerful cleric and ex-president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

"The young boys are suffering from depression and serious physical and mental damage since their rapes," he said, urging an inquiry into the claims.

Karroubi made the allegations in a letter to Rafsanjani in his capacity as head of the Assembly of Experts, the powerful body which selects the supreme leader and supervises his activities.

Karroubi, a reformist former parliamentary speaker who came a distant fourth in the June 12 election that returned President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power, has previously alleged that protesters were abused and beaten in custody.

About 2,000 opposition supporters were arrested in the aftermath of Ahmadinejad's disputed victory. Most have been released, but around 200 remain behind bars. At least 110 have also been put on trial.

Karroubi urged Rafsanjani to take up the issue with supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, saying the "clergy and the Islamic republic will be held responsible" for such acts, according to a copy of the letter obtained by AFP.

"The veracity of the letter's contents have to be ascertained," ISNA news agency quoted current parliament speaker Ali Larijani as saying.

"I am also awaiting the report of our parliamentary panel which is probing the issue of detainees."

Rafsanjani himself withdrew from leading this week's Friday prayers in Tehran -- which since the election have become a forum for political grandstanding -- to prevent "political abuse" of the event, an official said.

On Sunday, the head of the Revolutionary Guards' political bureau called for Karroubi, fellow defeated election challenger Mir Hossein Mousavi and Ahmadinejad's predecessor Mohammad Khatami to go on

trial for plotting a "velvet coup."

Several reformist newspapers have reported that some protesters died in custody, but officials say they succumbed to disease and denied they were beaten.

Last month Khamenei ordered the closure of one detention centre, saying it was not "up to required standards."

The crackdowns have outraged the international community as Iran continues to battle its worst crisis since the 1979 Islamic revolution, with deep rifts between clerical groups and the ruling elite.

But Tehran hit back on Monday after Western governments condemned what they called "show trials."

Hardline cleric Ahmad Khatami urged Tehran to take a "crushing and confronting" line with Britain, while another cleric, Ahmad Salek, said the British embassy had become "America's and the Zionist regime's den of spies."

Foreign ministry spokesman Hassan Ghashghavi called the Western criticism "illegal and surprising," and said the court testimony by embassy employees was proof of "foreign intervention in Iran's domestic affairs."

Those on trial include French lecturer Clotilde Reiss, British embassy analyst Hossein Rassam and French embassy employee Nazak Afshar.

Ghashghavi said Saturday's court testimony by Rassam, who has now been charged with spying, was not made under pressure.

"Rassam was already freed before he appeared in court. He was at home. He was under no pressure," Ghashghavi told reporters.

Rassam, one of a total of nine local British embassy staff initially detained, said he had been instructed to monitor the protests for the British government.

Ghashghavi also criticised Reiss, who admitted taking part in protests in Tehran and taking photographs and video footage, according to local media reports.

France said President Nicolas Sarkozy has made securing her release his "top priority."

US envoy to the United Nations Susan Rice said on Sunday the "show trials" were "clearly a demonstration of the fact that the Iranian leadership is not reconciled to the concerns of its people regarding the validity of the elections."