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Iranian boy who defied Tehran hardliners tells of prison rape ordeal

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The 15-year-old boy sits weeping in a safehouse in central Iran, broken in body and spirit. Reza will not go outside — he is terrified of being left alone. He says he wants to end his life and it is not hard to understand why: for daring to wear the green wristband of Iran's opposition he was locked up for 20 days, beaten, raped repeatedly and subjected to the Abu Ghraib-style sexual humiliations and abuse for which the Iranian regime denounced the United States.

"My life is over. I don't think I can ever recover," he said, as he recounted his experiences to *The Times* — on condition that his identity not be revealed. A doctor who is treating him, at great risk to herself, confirmed that he is suicidal, and bears the appalling injuries consistent with his story. The family is desperate, and is exploring ways of fleeing Iran.

Reza is living proof of the charges levelled by Mehdi Karoubi, one of the opposition's leaders, that prison officials are systematically raping both male and female detainees to break their wills. The regime has accused Mr Karoubi of helping Iran's enemies by spreading lies and has threatened to arrest him.

The boy's treatment also shows just how far a regime that claims to champion Islamic values is prepared to go to suppress millions of its own citizens who claim that President Ahmadinejad's re-election was rigged.

Reza's ordeal began in mid-July when he was arrested with about 40 other teenagers during an opposition demonstration in a large provincial city. Most were too young even to have voted. They were taken to what he believes was a Basiji militia base where they were blindfolded, stripped to their underwear, whipped with cables and then locked in a steel shipping container. That first night Reza was singled out by three men in plain clothes who had masqueraded as prisoners. As the other boys watched, they pushed him to the ground. One held his head down, another sat on his back and the third urinated on him before raping him.

"They were telling us they were doing this for God, and who did we think we were that we could demonstrate," Reza said. The men told the other boys they would receive the same treatment if they did not co-operate when interrogated the next day.

Reza was then taken outside, tied to a metal pole and left there all night. The next morning one of the men returned. He asked whether Reza had learnt his lesson. "I was angry. I spat in his face and began cursing him. He elbowed me in the face a couple of times and slapped me." Twenty minutes later, he says, the man returned with a bag full of excrement, shoved it in Reza's face and threatened to make him eat it.

Reza was later taken to an interrogation room where he told his questioner he had been raped. "I made a mistake. He sounded kind, but my eyes were blindfolded. He said he would go look into it and I was hopeful," Reza said.

Instead, the interrogator ordered Reza to be tied up and raped him again, saying: "This time I'll do it, so you'll learn not to tell these tales anywhere else. You deserve what's coming to you. You guys should be raped until you die."

He was subjected to further brutal sexual abuse — and locked up for three days of solitary confinement.

Reza was then forced to sign a "confession" in which he said that foreign forces had told him and his friends to burn banks and state media buildings. He was told to identify as the ringleader a 16-year-old friend who had been so badly



A supporter of Mir Hossein Mousavi during a recent protest

beaten that he was in hospital.

"I was shaking so much I couldn't even hear what they were saying," said Reza. "I just signed whatever they put in front of me without looking at it. I was scared they would rape me again."

The next day Reza and other detainees were transferred to a police detention centre, where he was held for a further week.

On the third day, police officers entered the cell in the middle of the night, blindfolded him and led him to the toilet, where he was again raped. "My hands began shaking, my legs were weak and I couldn't stand up properly. I fell down and smashed my head hard on the ground to try and kill myself. I started screaming and shouting for them to kill me. I just couldn't bear it anymore. I hated myself," he said, weeping at the memory.

The following morning he was summoned by a police commander, who asked why he had been screaming the previous night. When he explained, he was asked to identify his rapist. The boy said he had been blindfolded, so the chief commander hit him and accused him of lying. He was forced to sign a letter admitting he had made baseless accusations against the security forces.

Reza's ordeal was far from over. He was taken with about 130 other prisoners to the city's Revolutionary Court, where they were herded into a yard. The judge told them that he would hang those who had violently resisted the Islamic revolution and read out the names of ten teenagers, including Reza. The message was clear: if they continued to say they had been raped they would be executed.

The judge sent them to the city's central prison, where Reza was handcuffed and held in a small cell with six other boys for ten more days. In the evenings officers beat the boys and taunted them with the words: "You want to cause a revolution?".

Periodically, the most senior officer would take the boys away, three at a time. "When they returned they would be very quiet and uneasy," Reza said. When his turn came he and the others were led into a small room and ordered to strip and have sex with each other. "He told us that with this we would be cleansed — we would be so shattered that we would no longer be able to look at each other. This would help calm us down."

After 20 days Reza's family finally secured his release on bail of about £45,000 — and with a final warning that he should say nothing about his treatment. His brother said: "A friend of mine who is a guard in the prison where Reza was being held had told me he was ill. The night he was released he was crying uncontrollably; then he broke down and told my mother everything."

The family persuaded a hospital doctor they knew to treat him, despite the danger to herself. She has treated his physical injuries and given him antibiotics and sedatives but cannot perform an internal examination. Reza is deeply traumatised, terrified of being returned to prison and barely sleeps.

The doctor told *The Times* that other detainees had suffered a similar fate. "We have many cases in the hospital but we can't report on them. They won't let us open a file. They don't want any paperwork," she said.

Drewery Dyke, an Amnesty International Iran researcher, said that Reza's case was "consistent with other reports we have received in terms of the severity of disregard for human dignity, the unrestricted abuse without any recourse to justice, the involvement even of judicial persons in rape abuse and the denial of the basic right to healthcare".

Reza, at least, survived to tell the world his story. The 16-year-old friend he had to name as the ringleader has since died in hospital from his injuries.

? *The identities of all people mentioned in the article have been withheld.*

NATION IN TURMOIL

June 12 Presidential elections held after a campaign marked by huge rallies in support of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his main challenger, Mir Hossein Mousavi

June 13 Mr Mousavi calls for vote counting to stop, saying there are "blatant violations". Government says Mr Ahmadinejad won with 62.63 per cent of the vote. Angry crowds assemble in Tehran

June 14 Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei gives his blessing to the disputed results

June 15 He agrees to investigate the election as tens of thousands of Mousavi supporters take to the streets in the

largest protest since the 1979 revolution. At least eight are killed and 368 detained, says Amnesty International

June 16 Mass rallies continue while foreign media are banned from reporting on the streets of Tehran

June 19 State television says more than 450 are detained during clashes in Tehran. At least ten are killed, including Neda Saledi Agha Soltan, apparently shot by a militia sniper. Her murder is seen around the world on the internet

June 21 Mr Ahmadinejad accuses US and Britain of fuelling protests

June 23 Britain expels two Iranian diplomats after two of its diplomats are thrown out of Iran. Britain and US condemn beatings and arrests of demonstrators

July 22 Amnesty International says it has received the names of at least 30 killed during the demonstrations

August 1 Thirty people put on trial for alleged opposition "conspiracy". Amnesty denounces the trials as "grossly unfair"

August 5 Mr Ahmadinejad is sworn in for second term

August 10 "Confessions" from defendants on trial, including a British Embassy employee and a French student, are said to prove a Western plot to topple the Iranian government

August 11 Former opposition candidate Mehdi Karoubi says detainees have been systematically raped and tortured in jails

August 14 Reformist MPs denounce government brutality and call for Ayatollah Khamenei's qualifications for position of Supreme Leader to be investigated

August 20 Mr Karoubi says he is ready to present evidence of rape

Sources: Amnesty International, Reuters, Times database

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