



Witness Statement of Amjad Hossein Panahi

Name: Amjad Hossein Panahi

Place of Birth: Qoruchai, Iran

Date of Birth: October 23, 1983

Occupation: Political Activist

Interviewing Organization: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC)

Date of Interview: February 19, 2011 and April 7, 2012

Interviewer: IHRDC Staff

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The views and opinions of the witness expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center.

Statement

Background

1. My name is Amjad Hossein-Panahi and I was born on October 23, 1983. I am from a village called Qoruchai, near the town of Khorbeh in Dehloran County in the Kurdistan province of Iran. In late 2001, I became a clandestine member of an organization called the Komala.¹ Due to my membership in the Komala, [agents of] the Intelligence [Ministry] targeted me, and I was forced to flee Iran and escape to Iraqi Kurdistan. I lived in Iraqi Kurdistan as an official Komala cadre member until late 2010, when pressure from [agents of] the Iranian security forces there forced me to leave Iraqi Kurdistan and seek asylum in Germany. Unfortunately, the United Nations is not active in Iraqi Kurdistan and thus I had no choice but to enter Germany illegally. I come from a family of six brothers and two sisters and we've all been harassed and tortured in some form or another. One of my brothers, Ashraf, was assassinated. My brother Afshin is being held in Qorveh Prison. My older brother Anvar is in Sanandaj Central Prison. Rafiq is in Iraqi Kurdistan; my younger brother Ramin Hossein-Panahi lives in our village and sometimes receives threats from the Intelligence Ministry; and I am now in Germany.

Childhood

2. Kurdistan has been entrenched in civil war and political harassment since the popular Revolution of 1978-79 and the foundation of the Islamic Republic, especially when we voted "No" to the Islamic Republic referendum on April 1, 1979. As a result, Ayatollah Khomeini ordered an army attack on the Kurdish regions on August 19, 1979.² It is no surprise that by the time Kurdish children reach adolescence, they are exposed to the injustices perpetuated in Kurdistan. They identify as an "other" outside of Iranian citizenship. They feel that they belong to a coherent region comprising the provinces of Kurdistan, Western Azerbaijan and Eastern Azerbaijan, Ilam and Kermanshah. These provinces constitute fifteen percent of Iran's total population, and [much of] that fifteen percent is Kurdish.
3. Kurdish children are taught to read and write in Farsi, a language other than their mother tongue. I grew accustomed to reading and writing in Farsi, but when I was 15, I realized that it was not my native language. As a Kurdish adolescent, why was I unable to write my thoughts in my mother tongue? I was forced to communicate with my friends in Farsi and I couldn't express myself adequately as Farsi was my second language. When I put pen to paper, it was impossible to transcribe my inner thoughts because Farsi was not my native language.

¹ Komala, or *Sazman-i Inqilabiyeh Zahmatkishan-i Kurdistan-i Iran*, or the Organization of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan, is a leftist Kurdish political party formally established after the 1979 revolution.

² There are competing narratives on why the Islamic Republic's first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, ordered an attack on the Kurdish regions of Iran in August 1979. For more about these events see IHRDC, Haunted Memories: The Islamic Republic's Executions of Kurds in 1979, (September 2011), available at: <http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/reports/3508-haunted-memories-the-islamic-republics-executions-of-kurds-in-1979.html>

4. Kurdistan is different from any other region in Iran with regard to social rights, housing, nutrition, unemployment, drug addiction, and militarization.³ The moment one enters Kurdistan, the landscape of the region clearly shows the perpetration of these injustices. The lack of welfare is obvious from the underdeveloped infrastructure to the rundown buildings and lack of industry. Since childhood, I heard the sounds of bullets killing people. Everyday, my neighbors, relatives and friends would be arrested on various pretexts and after some time would disappear or be executed; their only crime was that they were Kurdish. Kurds are a people who yearn for basic rights and welfare. As soon as we speak, they slap us in the mouth by naming us ‘separatists.’ However, Kurdish parties do not aim at separatism; we are a nation within Iran. Kurdish youth are not raised with such ideals. Yet the IRI always hits us over the head with this ‘separatist’ label to prohibit us from speaking out. They tell us, “You are an Iranian, classified under a group called the Persian Nation.” Yet the IRI never considered the Iranian Kurds the same ethnicity as other Persians, and therefore, we were always outsiders.

Supporting and Joining Komala

5. When one reaches the age of puberty they realize that they cannot live in Iran while they are treated as second-class citizens and suffer below the poverty line while also living in an area that is administered by force. I was labeled “a Kurd” in society and did not possess the same rights granted to my peers in Tehran or other cities in Iran. Therefore, when I was 15 years old, I was introduced by my parents and others to the activities of Komala and the Democratic Party. These were two formal parties in Kurdistan fighting discrimination against the Kurdish people.
6. I have fortunately never been arrested due to the fact that I fled Iran in my teenage years. I became aware that I could not express my political opinions, engage in political discussion or enjoy my right to freedom of speech. I wanted the same things that the Kurdish people wanted, but expressing these most basic of human desires is a crime in Kurdistan. You’re forced to choose between fleeing Iran, being imprisoned or keeping your opinions to yourself. When I was 17, security-intelligence forces identified me as a Komala supporter and one of my friends was arrested. At that point, I left Iranian soil, after which I openly joined Komala after a three-month political training course and formally became a member of their militia (*peshmerga*). Since that time I have been politically active.

Targeting of Family Members

7. From what I remember, the IRI initially targeted my distant relatives, but not my immediate family. My immediate family started being harassed when one of my brothers and I officially joined the Komala. The IRI could not get a hold of us and thus began targeting our family [instead]. And so, the brutality began. My family was threatened many times. They killed one of my brothers, imprisoned another brother, and my eldest brother was sentenced to execution, but thankfully that sentence was overturned. They also arrested my two sisters, harassed my mother, and arrested my father dozens of times. They raided and searched our house hundreds of times, without a search warrant or an explanation.

The Arrest of Anvar Hossein-Panahi

³ Note: other regions of Iran predominantly populated by ethnic minorities, such as the Arab-majority region in Ahwaz or the Balouch-populated region in the southeast of Iran bordering Pakistan also suffer from endemic poverty, low rates of education and literacy and high rates of unemployment relative to other regions of Iran.

8. My older brother, Anvar Hossein-Panahi, was a civil activist working for an NGO on addiction recovery issues and served on the local dispute resolution council. Anvar and Ashraf, my brother who was later killed by the Intelligence Ministry, were not involved in Komala, but because the Intelligence Ministry could not find my brother Rafiq Hossein-Panahi and I, who are Komala members, they targeted Anvar instead in order to intimidate us into limiting our political activity.
9. According to my family, on December 6, 2007 at about 5 AM, authorities came to Anvar's house to arrest him. The plainclothes Intelligence Ministry officers pulled up to Anvar's house in two Toyota Hilux pickup trucks. They did not provide an arrest warrant, [the lack of] which has unfortunately become the norm for Kurds. After roughing up Anvar and insulting our family—which, again, is customary—they blindfolded him and tied his arms, and transported him to the Qorveh Intelligence Office. They also arrested our cousin Arsalan Ouliayee that night. Only after a period of torture were they informed of the charges against them.
10. Anvar and Arsalan were in the Intelligence Ministry's interrogation chambers in Qorveh for six months, where they were severely tortured. They broke Anvar's ribs and he subsequently suffered a kidney infection that went untreated. They plied Anvar's nails off, and his body was blanketed with hot iron rod marks. Two of Anvar's cellmates, Lotfollah Lotfollahpour and Shahrokh Bibak, who both currently reside in Iraqi Kurdistan, have described the torturous tactics that Anvar endured. For example, one evening during the winter of 1386 or 1387 (2007-08/2008-09), Anvar's jailers tied him up outdoors in the prison yard and threw ice water over his naked body. By that morning he had passed out from the cold six times, only to be revived and forced to endure the same torture again and again. They kept reviving Anvar in the hopes that they could extract a confession from him despite his innocence. They had a pre-written confession which they held in front of Anvar, hoping that he would finally succumb to the pain and sign the false confession.
11. During the summer of 2008, Branch 2 of the Revolutionary Court in Sanandaj convicted Anvar Hossein-Panahi and Arsalan Ouliayee of *muharibih* [warring against God], collusion with the Komala Party, and conspiracy to overthrow the regime. Even in the absence of evidence proving the Intelligence Ministry's charges, they were sentenced to death.
12. With the help of the international community and human rights activists, the European Union and Amnesty International⁴ issued a statement of protest. Moreover, over 1,500 political activists and human rights activists launched a widespread protest that attracted international attention to Anvar's death sentence. Additionally, political prisoners, including those at Sanandaj prison, staged a general protest and 19 prisoners went on a hunger strike, a group for which Anvar was a spokesperson and 500 local residents demonstrated in front of the Sanandaj Court calling for the execution to be overturned. Ultimately Anvar's execution sentence was reduced to 16 years in prison; yet this 16-year sentence is not conclusive as [given relevant precedent] the Intelligence Ministry may at any moment falsify records to change this sentence again. Although this 16-year sentence has been announced, neither my family nor Anvar's attorneys have received a written notice of it. Presently Anvar is in solitary confinement in Sanandaj prison. He is denied the customary furloughs and frequently is barred from receiving visitors.

⁴ See <http://www.payvand.com/news/08/sep/1140.html>.

The Assassination of Ashraf Hossein-Panahi

13. Iran's Intelligence Ministry is an institution which has branches in various provinces and towns. It has a large branch in Kurdistan located in Sanandaj, and a bureau in every city. Our region was controlled by the Intelligence bureau at Qorveh and the provincial branch in Sanandaj. My brother Ashraf received multiple threats from both of these offices.
14. My other older brother Ashraf Hossein-Panahi was a human rights and civil activist who secretly worked on prisoners' rights issues and was a member of the Committee for Defense of Prisoners on Hunger Strike in Sanandaj. He wanted to investigate Anvar's case. The Intelligence Ministry threatened Ashraf many times over the phone and twice in person to cease all investigations. They called to threaten him many times, and came to our house twice and told my father to tell Ashraf to stop his interviews and other activities or else they would arrest him as well.
15. Ashraf collected about 5,000 signatures from credible local sources and documents proving the innocence of Anvar and Arsalan. At 7 PM on Thursday, September 28, 2009, Ashraf left his house to travel to Tehran to meet with Ashraf's lawyers, Mr. Ne'mat Ahmadi and Mr. Nikbakht. He wanted to give these lawyers the documents he had collected so that perhaps they could present them as evidence of Anvar's innocence in court. Ashraf said goodbye to our parents and his wife and told them that he was going to stop in Sanandaj for a day and leave for Tehran the following evening, to visit Mr. Ahmadi and Mr. Nikbakht.
16. En route, unmarked Intelligence Ministry vehicles chased down Ashraf and ran him over. He died from head injuries sustained during that accident. The murder of my brother Ashraf was widely protested by Iranian Kurdish human rights activists and a large funeral was held for him in Kurdistan.
17. At 9 AM on Friday, September 29, 2009, my family was notified by Sanandaj Hospital that their son had been in an accident and had been hospitalized. The forensics specialist at Sanandaj Hospital determined that Ashraf was run over by a car and died from a blow to the head that resulted in a brain seizure. A formal panel from the Sanandaj Police investigations bureau, whose impartiality I question, also conducted an investigation.
18. Later, my family and a number of human rights activists pressed charges against the police force for failing to hold the Intelligence Ministry responsible for killing my brother. Members of my family had seen an Intelligence Ministry vehicle that night between the two villages of Khulchai and Tetrchi in our region. Ashraf's corpse had been found on the road near where they saw this Intelligence Ministry vehicle. At the same time, the Intelligence Ministry bureau discouraged my family from following up on the case. We also filed complaints with international organizations and were planning to refer Ashraf's case to the international courts and press charges against the police for failing to hold the Intelligence Ministry responsible for killing our family member. The Intelligence Ministry arrested my sister, my father and my younger brother Afshin a month after we pressed charges. They warned us to drop the charges if we didn't want "any other sons to die." Due to the Intelligence Ministry continually ramping up its pressure against us, and for the sake of saving the lives of the rest of our family members, we withdrew our case.

Afshin Hossein-Panahi

19. My 19 year old brother, Afshin Hossein-Panahi, was arrested, harassed and tortured several times in retribution for our pursuit of Ashraf's case and was released on bail. About three months ago, he was arrested and sentenced to a year in prison by the Sanandaj Court. He received a one-year jail sentence for inquiring about my brother's case and for publishing news about prisoners. He is now at Qorveh prison. Two months ago he lost 50 percent of his vision in the course of his torture by Intelligence Ministry agents. I personally have not experienced torture, but I know that the Iranian Intelligence use the most severe types of torture methods. They tie down their victims and afflict them with physical and psychological pain. They forced him to give a televised interview against Rafiq and me, and against Anvar, who is a Kurdish civil activist.

My Sisters

20. In addition to my six brothers, I have two sisters who live in our village. One of my sisters received a three-year suspended prison sentence from the Revolutionary Court in Sanandaj because she gave interviews to Kurdish television stations regarding Ashraf's assassination and Anvar's initial death sentence. If she is ever determined by the authorities to have acted unlawfully, she will be jailed and serve the three-year prison sentence. She was not even present at her own trial. We are reluctant to appeal her sentence and ask for a less severe one because unlike all other courts around the world, the courts in Kurdistan Province issue sentences which we have no choice but to accept, because if a complaint or appeal is made the sentence may be increased. A clear example is Ehsan Fattahian, whose ten-year prison sentence, upon protest, was changed to a sentence of death. Regrettably the sentence was carried out. This is why we are reticent to appeal my sister's 3-year suspended sentence or Anvar's 16-year prison sentence or Afshin's one-year prison sentence [for fear the sentence on appeal could be harsher]. My other sister has not been in prison, but has been threatened several times.

21. The pressure on my family was so great that my father eventually sent a letter to the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon.⁵ He called on Ban Ki-Moon to reduce the Intelligence Ministry's governmental pressure on us, as we can no longer bear all these pressures. After some time, the Human Rights Council published a letter containing a report based on my family. I daresay that in the last ten years, the Hossein-Panahi family has borne more pressure than any other family in Kurdistan and that we have suffered the most damages. The members of my family have been forced into hiding, imprisoned, threatened and tortured without any evidence of guilt.

My Activities

22. Three years ago when my brother Anvar received the death penalty I urgently contacted different human rights organizations to request their help. I also contacted Farsi and Kurdish websites. Subsequently, a number of underground human rights activists inside Iran (I cannot name them) established an organization that we called the Campaign for Defense of Political and Civil Prisoners. This organization aimed to promote rights for prisoners and their families.

⁵See <http://planet-iran.com/index.php/news/201>

23. Because of my interviews and activism, which included interviews with the BBC and with Kurdish channels, the Intelligence Ministry ordered my family to put an end to my interviews and cease my human rights activism work. The Intelligence Ministry had a local website; they wrote there that they are tracking “branches of Komala” and other nonsense.
24. In spring 2010, I received a phone call from someone at the Intelligence Ministry who has been using the pseudonym “Mehraban” for thirty years. He has been the head of Sanandaj Intelligence office since I was a child. Nobody has ever met Mehraban and perhaps the same pseudonym has been used by a number of officials. Whenever someone is arrested and interrogated, s/he does not see the interrogator, who sits behind glass or behind a wall, but everyone has heard the name Mehraban.
25. The person on the other line had a Kermanshahi Kurdish accent; he did not introduce himself at first and asked me “Are you Mr. Amjad Hossein-Panahi?” Initially I thought that I was receiving a phone call from Canada by someone who perhaps wanted to interview me. I replied, “Go ahead, I am at your service.” He said, “If I introduce myself, will you hang up?” I said, “No! Why should I hang up?” He said, “I am Mehraban, the head of the Sanandaj Intelligence office.” I said, “Yes, I know who you are. Why are you calling me?” At the time, my telephone number was listed on news sites because I was giving interviews so I am assuming Mehraban obtained my phone number from one of these sites. He said, “Why are you giving so many interviews?” I said, “Part of my job is to expose these crimes of yours, a clear example of which is the persecution of my own family. Why did you kill Ashraf? What was his crime? Why did you give Anvar the death penalty? He has done nothing wrong. Why do you arrest my other brothers? Why do you antagonize my family?” He said, “All of these faults hang on your neck.” I said, “I am a political person and a human rights activist. I do not recognize the authority of your repression which extends not only throughout Iran but throughout all of the Middle East. Part of my duty is to expose this apparatus.” He said bluntly, “It’s the same with us! Part of our duty is to crack down and stifle people like you. And if we can’t reach you, your brother is here.”
26. Mehraban continued, “If you don’t stop your interviews and limit your activities, we will kill your brother (meaning Anvar Hossein-Panahi) here.” He said, “As soon as you open your mouth, we will send an order to court for your brother and execute him the next day.” Then he hung up and thankfully never called me again. Afterward, to keep them from harassing my family, I limited my human rights activities and stopped my interviews altogether.

Structure of the Komala

27. Presently the Komala has three organizational divisions. The main division, headquartered in Iraqi Kurdistan, is composed of the *peshmerga* militants and is the center of the leadership of the Komala. Another division is active in Iranian Kurdistan and it consists of secret leaders and cadres. The European division is centered in Germany and it has representative offices in much of Europe and America as well as some other countries, and it performs party advocacy. Our camp is twenty minutes outside of Sulaymaniyah, Iraq. That is our headquarters, which is a fairly large military camp, containing various divisions such as leadership, publications, leadership security, personnel and medical divisions. Each *peshmerga* militant works in one division. Our duty there was solely to defend ourselves. We did not fight anyone there of our own accord. The Iranian regime occasionally attacked us and we merely defended ourselves.

28. Supporters of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan are primarily located in cities such as Mahabad, Bukan, Orumiyeh, Naghadeh and Piranshahr whereas supporters of the Komala Party are primarily located in cities such as Saqqez, Marivan, Sanandaj, Kermanshah, Kamyaran, Dehloran, Qorveh, Bijar, Divandareh, and Paveh. The main support base of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan is in Mahabad and the main support base of the Komala Party is in Sanandaj.

Persecution of Iranian Kurdish Political Activists in Iraq

29. Many members of Komala and the Kurdish Democratic parties were killed in Iraqi Kurdistan. For example, Osman Kiani and Osman Farmani were assassinated after a visit from their families. At the end of the visit, they went to the garage to see their families off and as they were walking back from the garage to the Komala camp, they were shot by Iranian Intelligence Ministry forces in one of the alleys of Sulaymaniyah.

Persecution of Kurdish Iranian Political Activists in Iran

30. I know of a Kurdish political prisoner who received the death penalty on charges of supporting the Komala Party, *muharibih*, and acts against national security. He was sentenced to death by a court in the city of Saqqez. After this sentence was issued he went on a hunger strike in Saqqez prison. About nine months to a year ago he was transferred from Saqqez prison to the Saqqez Intelligence bureau, and ever since his transfer there has been no news of this man. His family has been searching for him in all manner of state institutions for a year now. The authorities have threatened his parents and told them that they have no right to search for their son and that their son has escaped from prison. According to rumors originating either from inside the prison or from the Intelligence Ministry or his family, there is a strong probability that this political activist was killed in prison under torture. Unfortunately, news like this never gets airtime in the Iranian or international community. It is only circulated in Kurdistan. Little attention is paid to Kurdistan; media discrimination is rampant. Crimes are committed in Kurdistan's Intelligence office and prisons that are never publicized or noticed.

Recruiting Kurds as IRI Intelligence Agents

31. Intelligence snipers often shot at Komala members when we would travel to and from our camp. These snipers were Iranian and Iraqi Kurds who were recruited as Intelligence agents. There were many nights when our camp was attacked by mortars and machine guns. I have been awakened many nights by the sound of bullets.

32. I remember a specific incident when one of our own Iraqi Kurds started to work for the Intelligence Ministry of the Islamic Republic. This gentleman was caught near our camp and was a member of an Islamic fundamentalist party. When the U.S. invaded Iraq, he became a fugitive in Iran and spent three months in Evin Prison. The Intelligence Ministry was able to release him from jail and trained him. They gave him an assignment to return to his family and resume normal life. His family lived near our camp. His mission was evidently to shoot mortars into our camp once a week. They caught him one night and turned him over to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) security forces. He was a hired Intelligence Ministry agent. And now there are over 150 Iranian companies doing business in Iraqi Kurdistan, but most of them are actually members or supporters of the Intelligence Ministry and IRGC Quds Force. The Iranian Consulate in Erbil is more active than even the embassy in Baghdad. Iran has the greatest number of its espionage safe houses in Iraqi Kurdistan and works extensively on infiltrating and pressuring parties and political activists in this region.

33. Most of these local Revolutionary Guards that are used against us are native Kurds. The regime buys them off to turn them against us. But it is important to note that Saneh Jaleh, for instance, was not a Basij member. He was a Kurd from Paveh and a revolution-spirited university student who demanded reform, social justice and an end to discrimination in Iran.⁶

⁶ For more on Saneh Jaleh, see e.g. Frontline, Saneh Jaleh and the Battle for a Slain Protester's Memory; February 16, 2011, available at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/02/saneh-jaleh-and-the-battle-for-a-slain-protesters-memory.html>