

Doc_Number: EU000276



Woman's Case Reflects Prisoners' Treatment in Iran

Jailed, beaten and interrogated: Woman's ordeal reflects treatment of protesters in Iran

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BEIRUT

The interrogator politely apologized for grilling the prisoner about her role in the mass protests over Iran's disputed presidential election.

Then the prisoner was made to sit facing a wall in the courtyard of Iran's Evin Prison, blindfolded, handcuffed and covered in an all-enveloping chador for four and a half hours under the blazing sun.

"America is our enemy," the interrogator told her. "Why are you so naive and can't see this? It's exploiting the situation here and wants to ransack the country. They don't have your interest at heart.

The ordeal of Nazy, a 29-year-old university student who worked with the campaign of defeated presidential candidate Mehdi Karroubi, gives a rare glimpse of what is happening to detained protesters. Nazy spoke to The Associated Press by telephone from Tehran after her release on the condition that only her first name be used, to protect herself and her family.

Thousands have been arrested since incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner, despite cries of fraud. The opposition claims detainees were savagely raped by their jailers and at least 69 people were killed, including some from beatings in prison.

The account from Nazy, who is known in reformist circles, could not be independently backed up. But former prisoners and human rights groups have noted that such treatment of prisoners — a mix of intimidation and persuasion known as white torture — is widespread, and that ordinary people along with well-known opposition politicians have been subjected to it.

"This case is one of thousands that take place in Iran," said Mohammad Javad Akbarein, an analyst who was himself jailed in 2001. "The majority of prisoners experience white torture. But it's worrisome when people become complacent when prisoners are not subjected to black torture and forget that their rights, dignity and honor are trampled on."

June 20 was a tense Saturday, the day after Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declared the presidential vote would stand and warned opposition leaders to end street protests or be responsible for bloodshed.

"We knew that from that day on anyone who comes into the street may have to pay a high price for it," said Nazy.

Nazy was on her way to buy a book in Tehran's downtown Enqelab Street and planned to attend a

demonstration that afternoon at 4. Before leaving home, she stuffed a bunch of white wristbands that said "change" into her backpack along with a folded poster she had prepared for the afternoon demonstration. White is the color of Karroubi's supporters.

At noon, Nazy had just climbed out of the car in front of the bookshop when a man in a white vest, blue shirt and white sneakers twisted her arm and slapped handcuffs on her. He pushed her forward and ordered her to walk a few yards in front of him in the busy street.

No sooner had she started walking that two clean-shaven young men in tight blue jeans and wearing green wristbands—the color of the other defeated reformist candidate, Mir Hossein Mousavi — caught up with her. "Don't make any noise; when you reach the narrow street we will help you escape," one of them told her.

But when she reached the street that led to the "Protective Police," the men pushed her inside the gate. They had duped her.

She walked into a huge courtyard packed with disciplinary police officers and with vans and jeeps. Nazy saw five or six men beaten as they were led into the detention center.

Nazy herself was hit a couple of times on her back, led into a basement and interrogated.

A female guard pulled out a poster from Nazy's bag. "Ha, instead of saying 'In the Name of God,' she's written 'In the Name of Democracy' on the poster," the guard mocked Nazy. "I'll show you what democracy really is."

Another guard came in and challenged Nazy for being a member of the 'One Million Signature' campaign — a group pressing for changes in Iran's laws on women.

"Why don't you live your life quietly?" she said. "Do you really consider yourself a woman? We are women who work to bring bread to the table, just like normal people. You ought to do the same and work. You call collecting signatures work?"

She said Nazy's family was looking all over town for her and added, "Why don't you use your brain a little?"

Nazy said she was working for the woman's rights.

"Can't you find a better way to fight for our rights?" the officer asked her.

By 4 p.m. the number of detainees — mostly men picked up at the protest sites — had swelled to more than 100.

Nazy and two other women waited for several hours in a van while more female demonstrators were brought in. It was dark by the time the van, which seated 12, was filled with 19 women plus two female and one male officers. They sat three to a seat, blindfolded, their hands tied to the chairs.

Every time they said a word, they were smacked in the head. At one point, the male officer threw six heavy bottles full of water on their heads.

Nazy slightly lifted her blindfold and watched guards hit around 60 men — mostly young — in the head with batons. Blood streamed down their faces and soaked their shirts.

The women were driven to the Vozara Monkerat (Moral Police), a temporary jailhouse for prostitutes and drug addicts.

The officers dumped them inside the green metal gates of the building and left. No one at the Monkerat knew why the 19 women were there, who had brought them, what their offenses were. They shoved every five of them into a 3 by 2 meter (10 by 6 feet) carpeted room where they couldn't even stretch their legs. The rooms were dark, with no windows.

By the time dawn broke, the women were screaming. A young mother was wailing. She had left her three-year-old child in the house alone to shop at the corner store when she was arrested.

After 15 hours, they were allowed to use the toilet, and only once.

Just before midnight, the women were escorted up the stairs into a room with a big library. They were given forms to fill: reason for their detention.

The middle-aged interrogator — in a short-sleeved white shirt and white pants and a golden chain around his neck — did not look like a typical officer of the regime. Nor did his assistant, a young man also clean-shaven and wearing chains.

A few minutes later, a young, thin man wearing a suit walked in.

"Do you realize your crime is much heavier than others?" the new man asked Nazy. "Because you are with the ('One Million Signature') campaign."

"I don't even know why I have been arrested," she replied.

He wrote at the bottom of the paper: "to be released on billion rial (about \$100,000) bail." He told her to sign the paper so she could go home that night.

Her charge was: disruption of law and order, action against national security, destruction of public property, participation in illegal gathering.

She said did not accept any of the charges.

"Then you will stay right here," he said. "Put on her handcuffs and blindfold and take her downstairs," he told the guard.

Nazy was terrified. She didn't want to stay there alone, and was worried about her family.

"If I sign it means I accept the charges?" she asked the man.

He said the charges would remain whether she signed or not. She was afraid that if she accepted the charges, they would slap a prison sentence on her.

"Don't sign. Stay here until you die," the man threatened her.

The young assistant tried to persuade her to sign.

"Will I then go home tonight?" she asked him.

"Yes. Don't you see you are signing bail?" he assured her.

The moment she signed, the interrogator said: "Put on her handcuffs and blindfold and take her to Evin."

"But you said I will be going home tonight!" Nazy said.

"Who do you think you are that I have to answer to you? Take her to Evin!" the man snapped.

It was after 2 a.m. when she and 6 other prisoners arrived at Evin. No one was expecting them. Guards said they had no vacant rooms, the prison was overcrowded.

Meanwhile, six busloads of men tied to the windows arrived from the criminal detention center of Shahpour, one of the most notorious centers known for torturing inmates.

Finally, at 2.30 a.m. the new arrivals were allowed into the Women's Section 2. They were searched and fingerprinted. Every six of them were put in a cell with a carpet, a toilet, a shower and a washbasin.

The inmates included a 30-year-old woman with breast cancer who was sexually molested while she was driven from Shahpour to Evin. The woman, who had undergone surgery a few months earlier, was bleeding when she arrived.

Among the others were a 15-year-old arrested with her mother and aunt; two 16-year-old girls riding bicycles near the protest site and, ironically, four supporters of Ahmadinejad, including a 40-year-old seamstress whose brother was a senior Revolutionary Guard official.

Most of the food was camphorated and numbed their lips. Water was undrinkable. Many prisoners felt nausea.

In the morning, Nazy wore a chador, was handcuffed and blindfolded and walked with a guard to an interrogation center known as the Evin School — so called perhaps because of the school desks used there.

The interrogator stood behind her asking questions and told her to write the answers at the bottom of the paper from underneath her blindfold. "He used foul language," said Nazy.

For every question, he took the paper from Nazy, wrote it down and returned it to her to write the answer. He asked the same questions over and over again.

Why did you vote for Mehdi Karroubi? Why did you choose Karroubi over Mousavi? How much money did you get?

Where did your meetings take place? Did you wear the veil at the campaign headquarters? How did you know how many votes you got? Who said so?

Who was the decision-maker in your campaign? Who wrote the slogans? Before the elections, did you plan if the results were not in favor of your candidate that you would cause disturbances?

He grilled her for nearly three and a half hours.

Nazy's last interrogation took 4 1/2 hours under the sun. All the female prisoners were brought to the courtyard and made to sit facing the wall. Interrogators sat behind them.

Some were very aggressive and even kicked and slapped the prisoners. But Nazy's interrogator was polite.

"This is what happens when there's a mass sweep. Some are innocent," he told Nazy. "Why did you have to come into the street that day when you knew the situation was tense?"

Then he gave her a lecture about U.S. designs against the Islamic Republic and the attempts of opportunists to destabilize the country.

"You've done nothing here, but if we don't find those responsible we will have to blame you, charge you for

it. Why? Because you brought about a situation where they could exploit it," he said.

Nazy was released on bail at 11.30 the following night, one week after being arrested.

She awaits a summons from court.

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