

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PRESS RELEASE

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Iran committing crimes against humanity by concealing fate of thousands of slaughtered political dissidents

- *Thousands forcibly disappeared and extrajudicially executed in prison in 1988*
- *Ongoing campaign to deny and distort truth and abuse victims' families*
- *UN must establish independent investigation into crimes against humanity*
- *High-profile figures accused of involvement in 1988 prison massacres named*

By concealing the fate and whereabouts of thousands of political dissidents who were forcibly disappeared and secretly executed in prison 30 years ago, Iranian authorities are continuing to commit crimes against humanity, said Amnesty International in a damning report published today.

The report *Blood-soaked secrets: Why Iran's 1988 prison massacres are ongoing crimes against humanity* calls on the UN to set up an independent investigation into the mass enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings which have gone unpunished for three decades.

“These blood-soaked secrets from Iran’s past continue to haunt the country to the present day. This report unravels the web of denials and distortions that the Iranian authorities have perpetuated over 30 years, both at home and internationally, to hide the truth that they forcibly disappeared and systematically killed thousands of political dissidents within a matter of weeks between late July and early September 1988,” said Philip Luther, Research and Advocacy Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.

“The fact that to this day the Iranian authorities refuse to acknowledge the mass killings, tell relatives when, how and why their loved ones were killed and identify and return their bodies, means that the enforced disappearances are continuing today. This has inflicted torturous suffering on victims’ families. Until Iran’s authorities come clean and publicly reveal the fate and whereabouts of the victims, these crimes against humanity are ongoing.”

For 30 years, families of victims have been denied the right to bury their loved ones and mourn their loss. Those who dare to seek truth and justice have faced relentless harassment, intimidation, arbitrary arrest and detention, as well as torture and other ill-treatment. Further suffering has been caused by the desecration and destruction of mass grave sites.

Meanwhile, individuals responsible for these crimes against humanity have evaded justice and in some cases those involved have held and continue to hold powerful positions in Iran today. More recently, after further evidence of what happened emerged, the mass killings have been celebrated in the country and those involved hailed as heroes.

“Instead of continuing their cruel attacks against families, the Iranian authorities should be ensuring their right to truth, justice and reparation – including returning victims’ bodies and identifying remains by allowing professional exhumations of mass graves and DNA analysis,” said Philip Luther.

For this report, Amnesty International gathered testimonies of more than 100 family members and survivors from across Iran and examined hundreds of documents from the organization’s own historical archives; reports, memoirs and other written materials from survivors and Iranian human rights groups; and statements from the UN and Iranian authorities. It also crosschecked lists containing the names of thousands of victims and examined victims’ death certificates, many of which deceptively give no explanation or cite “natural causes” as the cause of death. The organization’s research reveals the shocking national scale and geographical spread of the mass killings, identifying at least 32 cities across Iran where these atrocities took place.

1988 prison massacres

The report describes how, in late July 1988, the authorities put prisons on lockdown across the country and suspended family visits without giving any reasons. Over the following weeks at least 5,000 political dissidents were extrajudicially executed in a co-ordinated effort to eliminate political opposition. This was on the orders of at least one secret fatwa issued by the then Supreme Leader of Iran, Rouhollah Khomeini, which followed an armed incursion into Iran by the People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), an outlawed opposition group based in Iraq.

Across Iran, groups of prisoners were rounded up, blindfolded and brought before committees involving judicial, prosecution, intelligence and prison officials. These “death commissions” bore no resemblance to a court and their proceedings were summary and arbitrary in the extreme. There was no possibility of appeal at any time.

Prisoners were asked questions such as whether they were prepared to repent for their political opinions, publicly denounce their political groups and declare loyalty to the Islamic Republic. Some were asked cruel questions such as whether they were willing to walk through an active minefield to assist the army or participate in firing squads.

They were never told that their answers could condemn them to death. Some thought they were appearing before a pardon committee. Often, they only discovered they were to be executed minutes before they were lined up before a firing squad or nooses were put around their necks.

Most of the victims were serving prison terms issued years earlier. Some had been detained for years without trial, and some had already completed their sentences but were due to be released. Most had been imprisoned because of their political opinions and peaceful activities such as distributing leaflets and attending demonstrations.

The majority of the victims were affiliated with the PMOI, but hundreds of prisoners affiliated with leftist political organizations and Kurdish opposition groups were also executed.

Key figures involved in the killings

Many of the officials who participated in the “death commissions” in 1988 have held, and in some cases continue to hold, positions of power in Iran today. In particular, the report compiles evidence showing that the following officials participated in the “death commissions”:

- **Alireza Avaei**, Iran’s current minister of justice, was the prosecutor general of Dezful in Khuzestan province and was tasked with participating in the “death commission” in that city.
- **Hossein Ali Nayyeri**, who acted as Shari'a judge in the Tehran “death commission”, is today head of the Supreme Disciplinary Court for Judges.
- **Ebrahim Raisi**, the deputy prosecutor general of Tehran in 1988 and another member of the Tehran “death commission”, ran for the presidency in 2017 and has held several high-profile positions, most recently as the country’s prosecutor general until 2016.
- **Mostafa Pour Mohammadi**, who served as justice minister between 2013 and 2017, represented the ministry of intelligence in the Tehran “death commission”. In August 2016, he was quoted boasting about his role saying, “We are proud to have carried out God’s commandment concerning the [PMOI]”, and openly declared that he had not “lost any sleep all these years” over the killings.
- **Mohammad Hossein Ahmadi**, who participated in the Khuzestan “death commission”, is currently a member of the Assembly of Experts, a constitutional body that has the power to appoint or dismiss Iran’s Supreme Leader.

In August 2016, an audio recording was leaked of an August 1988 meeting in which some of the key officials from the Tehran “death commission” are heard discussing its harrowing work. In response to the publicity sparked by this revelation, Iranian leaders have openly celebrated the events of 1988, glorifying the purge and describing those responsible as worthy of receiving “medals of honour”.

These statements follow a three-decade long campaign of misinformation in which the authorities have downplayed the scale of the killings and demonized the victims as a “few terrorists”.

“The grotesque distortion of the truth about these heinous crimes, coupled with the clear lack of remorse displayed by those with blood on their hands, is sickening. All individuals involved in committing and concealing these crimes must be brought to justice in fair trials that exclude the death penalty,” said Philip Luther.

Need for international action

Families and survivors have been grossly failed by the UN and international community. The lack of condemnation from the UN Commission of Human Rights at the time and the failure of the UN General Assembly to refer the situation to the Security Council emboldened Iran’s authorities to continue to deny the truth and inflict torture and other ill-treatment on the families.

“The abject failure of the UN and international community to pursue truth and justice for the atrocities committed by Iranian authorities has had catastrophic consequences

not only on survivors and victims' families but also on the rule of law and respect for human rights in the country. Iran's authorities must no longer be allowed to shield themselves from accountability for their crimes against humanity," said Philip Luther.

"With no prospects of justice for victims inside Iran, it is even more crucial that the UN establishes an independent, impartial and effective international mechanism to help bring those responsible for these abhorrent crimes to justice."

Public Document

Notes to Editors:

The report will be launched with a media briefing at Amnesty International's international secretariat in London hosted by the organization's Secretary General Kumi Naidoo on 4 December 2018

For more details, to register to attend, receive embargoed materials or arrange an interview please contact: Sara Hashash, MENA Media Manager on sara.hashash@amnesty.org or +44 7831 640 170 or contact Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on: +44 20 7413 5566 or press@amnesty.org twitter: @amnestypress