



URGENT INTERNATIONAL ACTION NEEDED TO SECURE RELEASE OF KURDISH ACTIVISTS AND OTHERS ARBITRARILY DETAINED IN IRAN

February 3, 2021

We, the undersigned 36 civil society and human rights organizations, call for the urgent attention of the international community to an ongoing wave of arbitrary arrests, incommunicado detention, and enforced disappearances by the Iranian authorities, targeting scores of people from Iran's disadvantaged Kurdish minority in the provinces of Alborz, Kermanshah, Kurdistan, Tehran, and West Azerbaijan.

To date, the Iranian authorities have failed to provide any information about the reasons for the arrests, but according to credible information gathered from informed sources, there are serious concerns that the arrests are due to the individuals' peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of opinion, expression and association, including through involvement in peaceful civil society activism and/or perceived support for the political visions espoused by Kurdish opposition parties seeking respect for the human rights of Iran's Kurdish minority.

Based on past patterns of documented human rights violations by the Iranian authorities, the undersigned organizations are seriously concerned that those detained are at risk of torture and other ill-treatment aimed at extracting forced "confessions", and that these may be later used in grossly unfair trials for spurious national security related offences.

According to information gathered from informed sources, since 6 January 2021, at least 96 individuals (88 men and 8 women) from Iran's Kurdish minority, including civil society activists, labour rights activists, environmentalists, writers, university students and formerly imprisoned political activists as well as individuals with no known history of activism, have been arrested by the intelligence unit of Iran's Revolutionary Guards or ministry of intelligence agents, at times in a violent manner.

The arrests have taken place in at least 19 cities in five provinces including: Karaj (2) in Alborz province; Javanrud (1), Kermanshah (2), and Paveh (4) in Kermanshah province;

Baneh (1), Divandarreh (1), Kalatarzan (3), Marivan (9), Sanandaj (4), Saqqez (3), and Saravabad (4) in Kurdistan province; Tehran (3) in Tehran province; Baneh (1); Bukan (23), Mahabad (10), Naqadeh (4), Oshnavieh (11), Piranshahr (7), Rabat (3), and Urumieh (1) in West Azerbaijan province.

According to informed sources, most of the arrests have been carried out without the authorities presenting an arrest warrant to those detained. In fact, the prosecution authorities of Mahabad and Urumieh, which is the centre of West Azerbaijan province and most of those arrested have been brought to the detention centres therein, have told detainees' families that their offices have not issued arrest warrants for those detained by the intelligence unit of the Revolutionary Guards, and they are not aware of their fate or whereabouts.

As of 2 February 2021, seven of those arrested had been released (in three cases on bail and in four cases unconditionally), but the rest remain in detention without access to their families and lawyers, and there are widespread fears that the wave of arbitrary arrests is continuing.

Incommunicado detention and enforced disappearances

According to information obtained from informed sources, of the 89 individuals who remain detained, at least 40 have are being subjected to enforced disappearance, and the authorities are refusing to reveal any information about their fate and whereabouts to their families.

The remaining 49 are held in the following locations: 25 in the detention centre of the ministry of intelligence in Urumieh, 13 in the detention centre of the intelligence unit of the Revolutionary Guards in Urumieh, three in the detention centre of the ministry of intelligence in Mariwan, five in the detention centre of the intelligence unit of the Revolutionary Guards in Sanandaj, two in the detention centre of the ministry of intelligence in Kermanshah, and one in the central prison in Mahabad.

The information concerning the whereabouts of these detainees emerged after some of them were allowed to make a brief phone calls to their families several hours or days after their arrests, informing them of their whereabouts. However, the authorities have refused to inform the detainees' families of the reasons for their detention and have prohibited further communication between the detainees and their loved ones, including phone calls or family visitation. The detainees have been denied their rights to access legal counsel and to challenge the lawfulness of their detention, and the authorities have told their families that this situation will continue until the investigation process is completed.

These abusive detention conditions, which are in violation of both Iranian law and international human rights law, are placing the detainees at a serious risk of torture and other ill-treatment, which is practiced on a widespread and systematic basis in detention centers run by Iran's security and intelligence bodies.

Revolutionary Guards and ministry of intelligence agents have subjected the families of detainees to threats and insults when they have sought information about their loved ones and warned them against speaking to the media or communicating with UN human rights bodies.

These abuses of due process render the latest arrests and detention, virtually in all cases, arbitrary and therefore unlawful.

Arbitrary arrests stemming from the peaceful exercise of human rights

According to information gathered, while a few of those arrested in the recent upsurge of repression are activists with a public profile and a prior record of involvement with environmental associations and cultural initiatives, the majority appear to be young men and women in their 20s who have pursued their nascent activism through informal circles focused on the civic and political empowerment of Iran's Kurdish minority.

We are concerned that this crackdown on human rights and the intimidation, harassment and attacks against young Kurdish activists by the Iranian authorities is aimed at deterring them from engaging in community organizing and shaping a vision for their society.

We are further concerned by reports indicating that many individuals may have been targeted based on their perceived support for the political visions espoused by Kurdish opposition parties that are banned by the authorities in Iran.

Iranian authorities severely restrict or, in many cases, ban political opposition parties, especially those that represent ethnic minority communities such as Iranian Kurds. Some Kurdish opposition parties have separate armed wings based outside Iran, which engage in armed confrontation against government state authorities inside the country. The Iranian authorities routinely target individuals from Iran's Kurdish minority for arbitrary arrest and detention simply based on their real or perceived support for or association with Kurdish opposition parties, and rarely provide sufficient evidence pointing to the direct or indirect involvement of the defendants in internationally recognizable offences.

We recall that the right to freedom of opinion and expression includes the right to be critical of the political social system espoused by the authorities and the right to peacefully advocate for any political ideas or visions so long as the idea spoused do not advocate hatred constituting incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. Penalizing individuals because of the opinions they may hold is a serious violation of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, protected under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Iran is a state party.

Appalling track record

For decades, ethnic minorities in Iran, including Kurds, Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis and Turkmen, have faced entrenched discrimination, curtailing their access to education, employment, adequate housing and political office. Continued under-investment in minority-populated regions exacerbated poverty and marginalization. Despite repeated calls for linguistic diversity, Persian remains the sole language of instruction in primary and secondary education.

According to Kurdish human rights groups, in 2020, over 500 people from Iran's Kurdish minority, including human rights defenders, were arrested for politically motivated reasons and charged with broad and vaguely worded national security-related offences. At least 159 of them were subsequently sentenced to prison terms ranging from one month to 17 years and four received the death penalty.¹

¹ The names of those sentenced to death in 2020 are Mohayyedin Tazehvared, Heidar Ghorbani, Saman Karimi and Shaker Behrouzi.

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on Iran, “Kurdish political prisoners charged with national security offences ... constitute a disproportionately high number of those who received the death penalty and are executed”.² In 2020, at least four individuals from Iran’s Kurdish minority were executed following grossly unfair trials related to their alleged involvement in armed opposition.³

We are gravely concerned that the failure to investigate, prosecute, and remove from positions of power those responsible for ordering, implementing and acquiescing to arbitrary arrests and detention, enforced disappearances, incommunicado detentions, torture and other ill-treatment in Iran has resulted in widespread and systematic patterns of human rights violations and crimes under international law, committed with absolute impunity.

We, the undersigned civil society and human rights organizations call on the international community to urgently raise the concerns documented above with the Iranian authorities and urge them to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release all those arbitrarily detained and end the campaign of arbitrary arrests of Kurdish people;
- Pending their release, protect all detainees from torture and other ill-treatment;
- Immediately inform families of the fate, whereabouts and legal status of their detained relatives in state custody and put an end to the practice of enforced disappearance;
- Ensure that individuals deprived of their liberty are granted their rights to notify a third person, access legal counsel, challenge the lawfulness of detention, and remain silent, and ensure that statements obtained in violation of the right to notification of rights are not admissible at trial;
- Carry out independent, impartial and transparent investigations into allegations of torture and other ill-treatment, and bring those responsible to justice in fair trials;
- End discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities, in law and practice, and respect, protect, promote and fulfil the human rights of everyone in the country; and
- Establish an official moratorium on all executions with a view to abolishing the death penalty.

² Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 18 July 2019, para. 87, available at: <https://undocs.org/A/74/188>

³ The victims included Mustafa Salimi (April), Hedayat Abdullahpour (May), Diaku Rasoulzadeh (July) and Saber Sheikh Abdollah (July).

Signatories:

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Ahwaz Human Rights Organization

All Human Rights for All in Iran

Amnesty International

Arseh Sevom

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Association for the Human Rights of the Azerbaijani people in Iran (AHRAZ)

Association of Humanitarian Lawyers

Balochistan Human Rights Group

Baluch Activists Campaign Organization

Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights

Centre for Human Rights in Iran

Centre for Supporters of Human Rights

Ensemble Contre la Peine de Mort (ECPM)

European Ahwazi Human Rights Organisation (EAHRO)

Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker

6Rang (Iranian Lesbian and Transgender network)

Hengaw Organization for Human Rights

Human Rights Watch

Impact Iran

Iran Human Rights

Iran Human Rights Documentation Center

International Educational Development, Inc.

Iranian Kurdistan Women's Centre

Justice for Iran

Kurdistan Human Rights-Geneva (KMMK-G)

Kurdistan Human Rights Network (KHRN)

Miaan Group

Minority Rights Group International

OutRight Action International

Siamak Pourzand Foundation

Société pour les peuples menacés, Suisse

Turkmen Human Rights Activists

United for Iran

Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO)

World Coalition Against the Death Penalty