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IRAN: FEARS OF SECRET EXECUTION MOUNT FOR DISAPPEARED PRISONERS FROM MINORITY GROUPS

The Iranian authorities must immediately reveal the truth about the fate and whereabouts of **Hossein Silawi**, **Ali Khasraji** and **Naser Khafajian** (also reported as Khafaji), three death row prisoners from Iran's Ahwazi Arab minority, and **Hedayat Abdollahpour**, a death row prisoner from Iran's Kurdish minority, Amnesty International said today. The authorities' refusal to provide the families of the men with information has sparked fears that they are at risk of being tortured or executed in secret.

Hossein Silawi, Ali Khasraji and Naser Khafajian have been forcibly disappeared since 31 March 2020 and Hedayat Abdollahpour since 9 May 2020 after being transferred from their usual places of detention to undisclosed locations. Their enforced disappearance has taken place amid an apparent rise in the number of executions since April 2020, including in prisons populated by ethnic minorities, which has further heightened concerns about their safety and well-being.

Iranian law requires the authorities to inform lawyers of the scheduled execution of their clients 48 hours in advance and grant families the right to visit their loved ones for the last time. In practice, however, the authorities have a long-standing record of secretly executing members of ethnic minority groups after transferring them to unknown locations and refusing to reveal their fate and whereabouts for months or even years.

All four men were sentenced to death following grossly unfair trials and amid serious torture allegations, which have never been investigated. They were denied access to their lawyers and families, as well as to any details of the evidence against them, during the investigation period. According to individuals with direct knowledge of their cases, security and intelligence officials repeatedly pressured them to make self-incriminating statements, which were then used by courts to issue convictions against them.

Officials' refusal to provide their families with any information about the men's fate and whereabouts is cruel and inhuman and amounts to enforced disappearance, which is a crime under international law.

The Iranian authorities must immediately stop inflicting further pain and suffering on the families of these men. They must immediately disclose the whereabouts of Hossein Silawi, Ali Khasraji, Naser Khafajian, and Hedayat Abdollahpour, halt any plans to carry out their executions, and initiate a thorough judicial review of their cases before it is too late.

HEDAYAT ABDOLLAHPOUR

Hedayat Abdollahpour, who has been on death row in the central prison in Urumieh, West Azerbaijan province, since 2017, was transferred to an undisclosed location with no declared reason on 9 May 2020. Since then, his distressed family has sought information about his fate and whereabouts from various official entities, including the central prison in Urumieh, the Centre for the Implementation of Sentences in Urumieh, prosecution offices in Urumieh and Oshnavieh, also in West Azerbaijan province, and the offices of the ministry of intelligence and the intelligence unit of the Revolutionary Guards in Urumieh. However, these official bodies have all refused to provide them with any information.

According to information obtained by Amnesty International, in a distressing development on 12 May, the deputy prosecutor in Urumieh told his family: "When the ministry of intelligence and the Revolutionary Guards do not tell you where your relative is, you better refer to the cemetery."

Hedayat Abdollahpour's lawyers have stated that the implementation of his death sentence would be unlawful, both under Iranian law and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a state party, as his application for pardon is currently being considered by Iran's Amnesty and Clemency Commission.

Hedayat Abdollahpour was arrested in Oshnavieh on 3 August 2016, in connection with an armed clash between the Revolutionary Guards and members of Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) which took place on 14 June 2016. On

20 January 2017, following an unfair trial, Branch 1 of the Revolutionary Court in Urumieh convicted him of “taking up arms against the state” (*baqi*) and sentenced him to death. His conviction was based on his alleged membership in KDPI, which he has denied, and no evidence pertaining to his involvement with armed clashes was presented at his trial. The Court also ignored and failed to order investigations into his allegations of torture and other ill-treatment during the 78 days of his solitary confinement in a detention facility in Almahdi military barracks in Urumieh, which is run by the Revolutionary Guards. Hedayat Abdollahpour has said that he has lost hearing in one ear as a result of the torture to which he was subjected during this period to “confess”.

Branch 47 of the Supreme Court subsequently overturned the conviction and sentence, citing incomplete investigations and the lack of inculpatory evidence and sent the case back to a differently constituted court of first instance for retrial. The verdict of the Supreme Court, which has been reviewed by Amnesty International, noted that Hedayat Abdollahpour was not found in possession of any weapon and that he was not in the area at the time of the armed clashes. However, on 15 January 2018, Branch 2 of the Revolutionary Court in Urumieh sentenced Hedayat Abdollahpour to death again without addressing any of the concerns raised by the Supreme Court about the lack of evidence against him. The verdict was subsequently upheld on appeal by the same branch of the Supreme Court.

HOSSEIN SILAWI, ALI KHASRAJI AND NASER KHAFAJIAN

Hossein Silawi, Ali Khasraji and Naser Khafajian, who were held on death row in section 5 of Sheiban prison in Ahvaz, Khuzestan province, were transferred to an undisclosed location on 31 March 2020.¹ Several days later, after repeated inquiries by their families, ministry of intelligence officials asked the relative of one of the men, Naser Khafajian, to go to the public relations headquarters of the ministry of intelligence in Ahvaz, and there the relative was allowed to speak with Naser Khafajian on the phone for a minute. Naser Khafajian was not able to tell his family where he was being held. Since then, the families of the three disappeared men have not heard anything about the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones and their queries to prison, Revolutionary Court and ministry of intelligence officials in Ahvaz have remained unanswered. Given this situation and the documented pattern of secret executions of Ahwazi Arabs in previous years, the men’s families are gravely concerned that they may be executed in secret.²

According to a statement issued by the spokesperson of the judiciary on 14 January 2020, Hossein Silawi, Ali Khasraji and Naser Khafajian have been sentenced to death in connection with an armed attack on a police station in Ahvaz that took place on 14 May 2017 and resulted in the death of two law enforcement officials. The proceedings which led to the men’s conviction and sentencing were grossly unfair. The men have said that they were held for months in solitary confinement in a ministry of intelligence detention center in Ahvaz, without access to their families and lawyers, and were subjected to torture and other ill-treatment by their interrogators to “confess”, reportedly resulting in their ribs or hands being broken.

EXECUTIONS SO FAR IN 2020

According to information received from Abdorrahman Boroumand Center, a US-based Iranian human rights organization that monitors the use of the death penalty in Iran, the Iranian authorities have executed at least 92 people since January. About one third of these executions (31) were carried out in April alone. Based on information received from Abdorrahman Boroumand Center, as well as Kurdish human rights groups Hengaw and Kurdistan Human Rights Network, a disproportionate number of those executed (between 15 and 25) since January were members of Iran’s Kurdish minority.

¹ For more information, see “Iran: Tortured prisoners in need of medical care”, 30 April 2020 (Index number: MDE 13/2237/2020), online: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/2237/2020/en/>

² See, for example, “Iran must halt hanging of Ahwazi Arab men after forced TV ‘confessions’”, 21 May 2014, online: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/05/iran-must-halt-hanging-ahwazi-arab-men-after-forced-tv-confessions/>; “Four death row prisoners at imminent risk amid reports of secret executions”, 14 June 2014 (Index number: MDE 13/035/2014), online: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE13/035/2014/en/>