

USADI Dispatch

A publication of the U.S. Alliance for Democratic Iran

Volume 1, No. 27

Thursday, May 6, 2004

USADI Commentary

Torture: Instrument of Iran's Rulers to Terrorize Population

For those concerned about the abysmal human rights situation in Iran, but unfamiliar with its ruling tyrants' double-talk and deception, recent news headline from Iran may have appeared comforting. Alas, the reality on the ground demands continued disgust with the way Iran rulers deal with the citizens and political dissidents.

Besieged by a barrage of questions from frustrated students, President Mohammad Khatami acknowledged last week that the country had many political prisoners. A day later, Judiciary Chief Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi issued a statement purportedly banning "any kind of torture to obtain confessions."

Human rights organizations wasted no time in dismissing this proclamation as a non-starter, pointing out that Shahroudi's statement was in fact an official admission of systemic use of torture in Iran and that it was a rehash of the long-ignored provisions already in the mullahs' Constitution. What is more, Iran has not yet joined the Convention Against Torture, because, among other things, Tehran has sanctioned the very conduct the world community has condemned as torture, as a divine punishment.

Some of the punishments under the Iranian regime's penal code are flogging, eye gouging, limb amputation and stoning, just to name a few. On any given day, a religious judge could issue an order for "Tazir", a religious term for physical punishment of the detainee that ranges from lashing the victim for hours to solitary confinement and electric shock, etc.

Many religious loopholes are used to justify the abuse. When the mullahs' officials ban torture, they are not talking about these *Sharia*-based forms of punishment. Torture and ill-treatment of political prisoners are a main component of Iran's highly elaborate and institutionalized suppression designed specifically to terrorize and subdue an increasingly restive population.

A few days after Khatami's remarks, the Judiciary spokesman even disputed the definition of "political prisoner", saying that Iranian law did not recognize the status of political prisoners. "This word has no legal definition, but some people consider actions against national security as a political crime," he said.

In the past quarter century, Iran's leaders have used spin and double-talk in dealing with the international community. In negotiations over suspending uranium enrichment program, the term "suspension" has a totally different meaning for the mullahs. The same goes for the meaning of "torture" and "political prisoner". The plight of thousands of Iranians who paid the price of trusting the mullahs for their words should serve as examples to those who still believe the mullahs really mean what they say.

Suppression of political and social dissent is a main pillar of Iran's theocracy. The mullahs shield their tyrannical house of cards behind tall, thick and ubiquitous walls of suppression. Therefore, defending the human rights of Iranians and all Iranian dissidents must be a main component of any policy to support Iran's democracy movement.

UN Rights Group Ignores Iran

Voice of America (Editorial)

May 2, 2004

The annual session of the United Nations Human Rights Commission has ended in Geneva with no rebuke of Iran. The commission's silence comes after a year of particularly grievous violations by Tehran's Islamic fundamentalist regime: the beating to death of Canadian-Iranian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi while in government custody; the disqualification of thousands of electoral candidates; the closing of independent newspapers and journals; the imprisonment of journalists, students, and other reformers; sentencing dissidents to be flogged or killed.

Basic human rights are denied by law in Iran. As one of the commission's own working groups reported, Iran's legal system stipulates that "evidence by a man is equivalent to that of two women"; punishments for sins "against divine law" are "the death penalty, crucifixion, stoning, amputation of the right hand and, for repeat offenses, the left foot, flogging"; "criminal proceedings in their entirety are... concentrated in the hands of a single person since the judge prosecutes, investigates, and decides the case."

Unlike the U-N Human Rights Commission, Ambeyi Ligabo, the U-N's Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, has not been silent about human rights abuses in Iran. In January, after a visit to Iran, Mr. Ligabo issued a report that described the "climate of fear induced by the systematic repression of people expressing critical views against the authorized political and religious doctrine."... In light of these findings, Mr. Ligabo recommended visits to Iran by the U-N's Special Rapporteur on the question of torture and by the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers.

President George W. Bush says that despite such abuses, the desire for liberty is alive in Iran. The U.S., says Mr. Bush, strongly supports the aspirations of Iranians for freedom.

The US Alliance for Democratic Iran (USADI), is an independent, non-profit organization, which aims to advance a US policy on Iran that will benefit America's interests, through supporting Iranian people's aspirations for a democratic, secular, and peaceful government, free of tyranny, fundamentalism, weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism. The USADI is not affiliated with any government agencies, political groups or parties.

1201 Pennsylvania Ave, NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20004

Tel: 202-661-4675, Fax: 202-318-0402, E-mail: dispatch@usadIran.org

National Review Online
May 04, 2004
Dissident Graveyard

By Nir Boms & Erick Stakelbeck

"I never said that we have no political prisoners. We have them, and that is incontestable. They have been jailed for what they believe in."

With this admission, made during an April 27 event marking Iran's "National Youth Day," Iranian President Mohammed Khatami merely acknowledged what the rest of the world has known for the past 25 years: The Islamic Republic is a graveyard for political dissidents.

Of course, that was supposed to change with Khatami's ascension to the presidency in 1997, as Iran's young people embraced him as a visionary who could break the iron grip wielded by fundamentalist mullahs over every aspect of Iranian society. Sadly, though, the opposite has occurred, as beheadings, floggings, and stonings have continued and the imprisonment and torture of Iran's democratic activists has grown even more frequent during Khatami's seven-year reign.

The latest indicator of just how ineffectual Khatami's tenure has been to the cause of democratic change came on April 28, as Iran's hard-line judiciary, in a transparent move designed to pacify critics of the country's abysmal human-rights record, ordered a ban on the use of torture "to extract confession." This practice — the mullahs' preferred weapon of choice in dealing with dissenters — had already been outlawed in the 1979 Iranian constitution. The supposed ban, however, apparently did not apply for Zahra Kazemi.

In June 2003, Kazemi, an Iranian-born Canadian photographer, was arrested in front of Tehran's notorious Evin Prison while taking pictures of the families of political prisoners. Branded a spy by the Iranian government, Kazemi was detained at Evin and reportedly brutalized... Kazemi, just 54 years old, subsequently died of a massive brain hemorrhage...

An incident similar to the one that apparently claimed Kazemi's life occurred last summer, when Iran's morality police broke up a party being held in the Tehran apartment of 35-year-old Moshen Mofidi. Two of Mofidi's sisters attended the party in the presence of several unmarried men, a situation forbidden by Islamic law.

Mofidi was jailed and sentenced to 80 lashes for the crimes of corrupting his sisters, owning an illegal satellite dish, and possessing medicines that contained alcohol... Mofidi, who had been suffering from severe lung and sinus infections at the time of his flogging, died a few days after being released from prison...

While Mofidi's case drew the attention of human-rights organizations worldwide, the most publicized incidence of Iranian barbarity was carried out with the help of another torture-friendly Middle Eastern dictatorship: Syria. In April 2003, Jamil Bassam and Abraham Khodabandeh, two Iranian political refugees and democracy activists who had lived in Britain for over 30 years, were visiting family in Syria when they were arrested at their Damascus hotel.

After two months of solitary confinement in a Syrian prison, the two men were flown — in violation of international law — to Tehran on a Syrian jet and into the waiting arms of Iranian authorities. Bassam and Khodabandeh are currently being held in Ward 102 of Evin Prison, where they are reportedly being tortured severely while awaiting trial on unspecified charges.

Reached by phone in England, Khodabandeh's wife, Elaha, said recently that she had not spoken to her husband since July 2003. "I want the mullahs to allow a (politically) neutral person, someone from the Red Cross or British Parliament, to visit my husband in prison," she says.

While that remains unlikely, two weeks ago, protests were held by Iranian activists in Washington, D.C., London, Stockholm, Oslo, Rome, Frankfurt, Berlin, and the Hague to condemn the two men's handover by Syrian authorities and the lack of a response from the British government on the matter thus far...

Further demonstrations were held on April 25, when, in a rare show of civil disobedience, 300 people gathered in front of the United Nations offices in Tehran to demand the immediate release of all Iranian political prisoners. The protest, like any event critical of the mullahs, was conducted under the watchful eye of Iranian security forces.

Despite such repression, Iran's pro-democracy activists have proven to be a perseverant and gutsy bunch, as evidenced by frequent reports of anti-government protests — most often led by university students — that have raged in the streets of major Iranian cities over the past several years.

But without more support from the West, achieving any real change will likely prove difficult for Iran's reformers. The U.S. regularly condemns Iran's human-rights record but has done little to encourage the country's democracy movements. As for the European Union, it recently chose not to table a United Nations resolution censuring flagrant Iranian human-rights violations.

It's no wonder the most likely place to find an Iranian reformer these days is in a Tehran prison.

Nir Boms is a fellow at the Council for Democracy and Tolerance and the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies. Erick Stakelbeck is senior writer for the Investigative Project, a Washington, D.C.-based counterterrorism research