

Speech by the Ahwaz Human Rights Organization

Meetings of the sixth Session on the Issues of Minorities of the UN Human Rights Council

Thank you Madam President,

I want to talk here about the religious minorities in the Ahwaz province in South West Iran. We have two communities in the region which suffer from discrimination and oppression; they are the Mandeans and Sunni muslims.

The oppression of Mandeans in the province of Ahwaz is ongoing and despite the fact that their numbers in the province reach, according to non-governmental statistics, nearly 70 thousand people, the Iranian constitution does not recognize them and their rights. According to Article XIII of the Iranian constitution the officially recognized religions in Iran, in addition to Shia Islam (the state religion), are Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity, with the exception of the Sabeans.

The non-recognition of the Sabean Mandeans as a belief is not due to religious and sectarian reasons, rather there are other reasons that makes the government not acknowledge this religion and they are purely political reasons because they are part of the Ahwazi Arab community. In addition to their suffering from national oppression like other sons of the province of Al-Ahwaz, they suffer from religious oppression as well as at the hands of the Islamic Republic, which deprives them of their rights, promotes hatred and slander against them, prompting many of them to emigrate, leave the country and search for a safe haven and a decent life and avoid facing further deprivation, oppression and insults.

The sons of this peaceful community in fact suffer from complex national, religious, and social oppression, and this, accordingly, deprives them of most of their rights as citizens in regards to rights, business dealings and managing the affairs of their lives.

Sabeans are being persecuted in Ahwaz at a time in which some Iranian officials call for moderation and dialogue among civilizations, and rapprochement between faiths, [yet] the scent of racial and sectarian discrimination against various national and religious entities in Iran remains in various forms and shapes.

They propagate openness with the outside world, but the repression at home continues in a more hideous way.

As for the second oppressed minority, they are the people of Sunni Arabs in Ahwaz province, where they are prevented from performing their religion practices or build their own mosques and the Imam of the only mosque for Sunnis in the region of Abadan, Sheykh Abdul Hamid al-Dossari, is still exiled to a remote region after he was released from prison where the authorities had imprisoned him for six years and the only Sunni mosque in the city of Abadan, in which Al-Dossari was an Imam, has been closed.

Iranian Sunnis in general complain about the policy of discrimination against them, but Sunni Arabs are the most oppressed because of their suffering from national oppression, as well as the ongoing sectarian conflict in the Middle East. The Iranian regime always perceives them as a threat to national security, because the sons of this minority share the faith and beliefs of the neighboring countries.

The Sunnis are being treated as servants and not treated as citizens. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic deprives Sunnis from assuming high positions in the State such as the position of the presidency and the presidency of the Shura Council (parliament), not to mention the position of the Supreme Leader. The current Iranian government is devoid of any Sunni minister and none of the members of the governing body of the Shura Council is a Sunni member. As for the members of the Guardian Council of the Constitution, which has twelve members, six of whom are appointed by the Supreme Leader and the six others are nominated by the president of the judiciary, who presents them to Parliament, which approves them. Those members are all Shiites, and there is not one Sunni among them. There are a lot of examples and evidence of the discriminatory policy which is practiced against Sunnis.

In addition to the Sunni minority present mainly in Ahwaz province, there are thousands of Ahwazi Arab citizens who have changed their faith from Shi'a to Sunni and the phenomenon of converting to Sunni Islam increased recently among the youth, as a reaction to the failure of the religious state model in Iran and them coming to the conclusion that Arabs of Ahwaz, despite the majority being of the fa of Shia, are subjected to national oppression and racial discrimination only because of their Arab nationality. The authorities continue the campaign of arrests and intimidation against those young people to prevent them from practicing their faith and religious rituals and hundreds of Sunni young people are still in prison only because they held communal prayers or owned books about the Sunni faith.

The Iranian regime exerts considerable efforts to curb the spread of this phenomenon through the religious establishment and its spread out pulpits. This through visual media, audio, readings, social networks, websites, and the constant broadcast of advertisements; all that in order to maintain the legitimacy of the structure of the sectarian system.

Authorities work to broadcast propaganda and lies, and forge facts attempting to link the issue of the Ahwazi Arab people to the sectarian struggle in the Middle East region in order to divert attention from the suffering of the Ahwazi Arab people resulting from national oppression policies and racial discrimination. It operates media outlets, most of which are supervised by the Revolutionary Guard's intelligence or the Intelligence Ministry, to highlight the sectarian conflict without addressing the suffering of the Ahwazi Arab people and the continuing racial national oppression.

Those youth who change their faith and even Shiite citizens, who reject the dictatorship of the clerics and are against extremism, call for the separation of religion from politics and focus on highlighting the oppressive policies, the displacement, the broadcasting of myths and the repression of freedoms in the name of faith and religion, and the policy of forging facts which the Iranian regime follows.

The Iranian regime responds to calls for freedom of faith and belief, for the respect of the rights of minorities and the elimination of discrimination, with repression, intimidation, violence, arbitrary arrests and torture, quick trials and executions.

And among the demands, that would [lead to] recognizing the rights of religious and sectarian minorities, are the amendments to the Constitution, the Penal Code and the Civil Code of the country, which discriminate against Sunni Muslims and non-Muslims of the Sabeen Mandeans.

We demand from the international community from this platform to put pressure on the Iranian government in order to eliminate discrimination, harassment and the oppression of non-Muslims and Sunni Muslims, as well as ethnic minorities.

And what is needed is the immediate release of the Sunni detainees and other religious minorities and to allow the construction of houses of worship, especially for the Sunnis in Al-Ahwaz and all other regions.

The authorities should recognize and respect the right of citizens to freedom of belief, including to change faith freely without being threatened, imprisoned and [facing] retaliatory sanctions.

We call upon the major countries not to reduce negotiations with the Iranian regime to the nuclear issue and to take advantage of this opportunity to put forward the issue of human rights violations and the issue of discrimination against minorities, and find solutions for their protection through bilateral and multilateral relations and dialogues, demanding from Iran to abide by the international commitments they have signed. We also renew our demands to put pressure on the Iranian government to allow the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, to see up close the tragic situation and the excessive oppression minorities experience.