

Ahwaz Human Rights Organisation

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I will speak about the systematic violence against the Arab minority in Al Ahwaz (officially Khuzestan) in South Western Iran and I will go into the reasons for the spread of this state violence, and the oppression, discrimination and marginalisation which has reached the point of ethnic cleansing. I will also put forward some recommendations on how to put an end to these forms of violence which have reached a peak during the last few years.

It is known that Iran is a country with a variety of nationalities, religions and sects and that non-Persian minorities within it make up more than half the population. However, the Iranian authorities do not release statistics listing the ethnic minorities of Arabs, Kurds, Azerbaijanis, Baluchis, Turkmen and others deprived of their political, cultural, economic and other rights.

With regard to the Arab Ahwazi minority in Iran, statistical field studies of Ahwazi academics confirm that the number of original Arab inhabitants is not less than 5 to 7 million residing in their historic homeland.

The systematic violence against Ahwazi Arabs begins with removing political activists by executions held both in secret and in public or by handing down long prison sentences and torturing activists from civil society such as writers, poets, teachers and intellectuals.

During the last 2 years, 12 activists have been executed as a result of their participation in peaceful protests or because of their membership of cultural associations, which were prohibited under the pretext that they carried out unauthorised activity against the government. A further 4 died whilst undergoing torture.

The Iranian government has perpetrated violent oppression against demonstrations and peaceful protests since April 2005 when thousands of Ahwazi Arab citizens demonstrated as a result of a letter leaked from the Iranian Islamic Republican President's office outlining a ten step plan to

change the demographic composition of Ahwazi Arabs from a majority to a minority (by a third) over a 10 year period.

The government, instead of answering the demands of the street to stop the displacement and the plans for demographic change and giving the Arab minority their basic rights, met and continue to meet the legitimate demands and peaceful protests with excessive violence. Large numbers of people died, many were injured and many were sentenced to death after being arrested on flimsy charges during the protests for threatening national security and employing propaganda against the government.

The use of violence against minorities in Iran was not only confined to political activists but includes ordinary citizens as well; young Arabs are subject to arrest just for wearing traditional clothing at Eids and festivals and security guards hit them and torture them. This occurs within a framework of political alienation and attacks on the national identity of the Arab minority in Iran.

As for symbolic and verbal violence, it is present in the persistent racial discourse against the Arabs in Iran. It starts with the academic curriculum and in books and the media and even in poetry festivals which put forward hostile views and contempt for the Arabs in Iran. It is also presents in the prevailing extremist national discourse of the powerful elite in government agencies.

As for other issues of violence, they are linked to the negligence of the authorities towards the health situation caused by the oil and petrol installations and the continued systematic destruction of the environment and the lack of concern given to catastrophes and widespread diseases. This occurs especially in the city of Al Ahwaz, the regional capital, which is the most polluted city in the world according to a report by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Thousands of citizens there are admitted to hospital after rainfall as a result of breathing difficulties due to acid particles and dust in the air.

The pollution of drinking water is another catastrophe facing the Ahwazis; it has become not only impossible to drink it but also impossible to use due to widespread dangerous skin diseases and chronic gastric diseases.

With regard to agricultural water, last October Sherif Husni the Ahwazi representative in the Iranian parliament accused the government of practising forced displacement through plans to divert river water and change the

climate of the area, polluting of the environment, causing desertification preventing cultivation and destroying the people's livelihood.

During the past year the protests of thousands of Ahwazi citizens and civil society activists and the holding of several meetings and protest marches on the banks of the river Karun have failed to stop the plans to divert the water.

During November, the authorities destroyed a number of Ahwazi families' houses under the pretext of unlicensed construction. This was carried out in the poor districts where half a million impoverished Ahwazi citizens were living on the outskirts of the cities in slums reduced to the lowest level of existence.

During the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's visit to Al Ahwaz at the beginning of the current year a number of Ahwazi activists asked him to address the urgent demands of the people to deal with serious crises such as unemployment, addiction, and environmental pollution, and to solve the problem of drinking water and lift discrimination by granting job opportunities to Arab citizens and allocate part of the oil revenues for construction in the province.

However, Rouhani, in spite of the pledges he had signed did not address any of these requests but instead increased the executions and unlawful arrests. Levels of unemployment and poverty have increased and diseases and epidemics have spread widely, clarifying that the problems of minorities haven't changed with the change of government whether the government is extremist or moderate. The problems are rooted in the centralised totalitarian state structure which doesn't grant the national regions any power to administer their own affairs, or to solve serious crises.

The authorities are concerned about security in the regions and, as President Rouhani's assistant and the former minister of information, Ali Younis explained, this security perspective is the decisive factor in the police situation in Al Ahwaz and even in Kurdistan and Baluchistan.

In reality, the failure to meet the demands of the Arab minority which is mired in deep poverty, deprivation and marginalisation in a region, which contains 80% of Iran's oil production, and the failure to fight rampant unemployment, which is at 35%, or to provide equal job opportunities put a limit on environmental pollution or grant cultural rights such as studying in their

mother tongue at school has pushed the Arabs into protesting, protests which are then usually suppressed with extreme violence.

In order to limit the increasing violence against the Arab Ahwazi minority the Ahwaz Human Rights Organization asks this forum and the organisations of international society to put pressure on the Iranian government through the mechanisms of the United Nations to keep to its pledged commitments to protect minorities and to work to implement the following advice:

1. Stop executions and arbitrary arrests and to set free political prisoners and those imprisoned for their opinions.
2. Carry out a census of Arab inhabitants and acknowledge their existence and ethnic identity and respect their economic, cultural and political rights.
3. Stop the plans to divert the water of the river Karun and other rivers and limit environmental pollution through releasing river water and fighting desertification.
4. Stop displacement and counter migration and the seizure of land belonging to Arab inhabitants originally from this region.
5. Allow the Arab minorities to form parties and civil society organisations and publish newspapers and publications in their language.
6. Fight unemployment, poverty and illiteracy, provide job opportunities and give priority in job appointments to Arabs in oil installations and government institutions.
7. Stop the habitual racist discourse against the Arabs in the curriculum and in the media and allow teaching in Arabic in schools and universities.
8. Take urgent steps to stop dangerous respiratory diseases such as asthma, cancer, skin diseases and internal diseases caused by air pollution and polluted drinking water and establish hospitals specialising in curing those suffering from these dangerous diseases.
9. Allocate a portion of the oil returns for construction and improving the environmental situation.