



Human Rights Council, Forum on Minority Issues

Ninth session - 24 and 25 November 2016 _ Geneva

Intervention by Ms. Sheyma Silawi from Ahwaz Human Rights Organization (AHRO) to the United Nations Human Rights Council Forum on Minority Issues, Agenda item 3.

Respecting minority rights as a means of preventing or mitigating the impact of humanitarian crises -

Thank you Mr./Madam chair for this opportunity:

My name is Sheyma Silawi from Ahwaz Human rights Organization. I am speaking on behalf of Ahwazi-Arab ethnic minority and I would like to submit some manifestations of systematic violations of my people's rights by the Islamic Republic and myself and my family's story and I will offer my recommendations at the end to prevent or mitigate this crisis.

- The towns and cities populated by the Ahwazi Arabs in Khuzestan continue to bear the scars of the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s where many Ahwazis including my friends and relatives have been killed.
- The Ahwazis have continued to be viewed with suspicion and hostility, by Tehran. And are being subjected to a sustained program of land confiscation and 'ethnic restructuring' **forced assimilation and 'Persianazation'**.
- The Islamic Republic has consistently ignored the demands of the Ahwazi-Arab minority to implement Articles 15 and 19 of the 1979 Constitution which guarantee the use regional languages and equal rights of ethnic groups – Iranian regime does not acknowledge and/or recognize the existence of Ahwazi-Arabs as a people, nationality or a community.
- The Iranian authorities are encouraging the forced migration of Arabs out of Khuzestan and their replacement with "loyal" ethnic groups, particularly ethnic Persians, erecting separation walls to segregate indigenous Arabs from non-indigenous and privileged migrants. Most Arab villages have no schools. While the illiteracy rate in Iran is about 10%-18%, it is over 50% among Arab men in Khuzestan and even higher for Ahwazi women.
- Indigenous Ahwazi students drop out of schools at a rate of 30% at elementary level, 50% at secondary and 70% at high school because they are forced to study the "official language", Farsi, a language which is not their's.
- Residents of war-torn Arab cities of Khafajieh, Falahieh (Shadegan) and Susangard suffer from unusually high rates of skin, heart and kidney disease due to continued storage and use of chemical and biological materials and other related pollutants remaining from the war.

- In most towns in the province – Bostan, Hovazeh and Dashte Azadegan – the local population has little or no access to hospitals or specialist doctors. In these cities, sick people frequently die needlessly during emergencies, such as accidents or in childbirth. According to the *Islamic Republic* newspaper, the Governor of Dashte-Azdegan in Khuzestan declared that his region has the country's highest incidence of child malnutrition. Dr Balali, director of the Dashte-Azedegan Health Network, claimed that 80% of children in the district suffered from malnutrition.
- Although Ahwaz has huge water resources (about 33% of Iran's total), the region is suffering from a water crisis. The water crisis has been caused by the long-term ecological mismanagement of the Karoon River, the largest river to flow through Ahwazi lands.
- The Islamic Republic has consistently ignored the demands of Ahwazi-Arab and other non-Persian minority groups to implement Articles 15 and 19 of the 1979 Constitution, which guarantee the use of regional languages and equal rights of ethnic groups. It does not acknowledge and/or recognize the existence of Ahwazi-Arabs as a people, nationality or a community.
- According to the Human Rights Watch Report, "Millions of Land mines remaining from the Iran-Iraq war in the province of Khuzestan kill and maim indigenous inhabitants of Khuzestan in south-western Iran every day". Most of these are girls and boys who work in the fields.
- Ahwazi people cannot realize their economics, social and cultural rights unless the Iranian state respects Ahwazi minority collective rights and allow us internal autonomy to build our civil society and develop our cultures, languages, histories and economies.
- Banning of our mother language corresponds to banning our literatures and cultures- inducing and creating unequal, degreed citizenship.
- The World Health Organization has listed Ahwaz City, the provincial capital of Khuzestan province, the most polluted city on the planet. This is due to man-made desertification caused by the diversion of waters of Khuzestan's two main rivers - the Karoon and Karkeh - to other provinces, preventing freshwater from reaching what were verdant areas further downstream as well as the marshes that border Iraq. The once green and agriculturally bounteous region is believed to be the location of the Biblical Garden of Eden with the Karoon and Karkeh representing two of Eden's four legendary rivers. This is an ancient land that has supported human civilizations for millennia.

The ancient and unique Hor Al-Azim marsh is threatened by continuing oil exploitation with utter disregards for the ecosystem that is crucial to regulating moisture and temperatures in an otherwise hot and arid region

RECOMMENDATION:

1. Iranian Government reveals to us whereabouts of our father Yousef Silavi who has been missing since 2009.
2. The Iranian government allows local self-rule and establishes a local representative Ahwazi parliament in the Arab-Majority Khuzestan province.
3. Implement Iran articles 15 and 19 by allowing local Arabic mother language to be taught in elementary schools. Allow Arabs to study in their own language to reduce the high illiteracy rate among Ahwazis.