

## Background Briefing

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# Pour-Mohammadi and the 1988 Prison Massacres

In 1988, the Iranian government summarily and extrajudicially executed thousands of political prisoners held in Iranian jails. The government has never acknowledged these executions, or provided any information as to how many prisoners were killed. The majority of those executed were serving prison sentences for their political activities after unfair trials in revolutionary courts. Those who had been sentenced, however, had not been sentenced to death. The deliberate and systematic manner in which these extrajudicial executions took place constitutes a crime against humanity under international law.

On July 18, 1988, Iran accepted the United Nations Security Council Resolution 598, calling for a cease-fire in the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. On July 24, the largest Iranian armed opposition group, the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO or MEK), based in Iraq since 1986, launched an incursion into Iran in an attempt to topple the government. Although this offensive was easily repelled by Iranian forces, it provided a pretext for the authorities to physically eliminate many political opponents then in prison, including many MKO members captured and sentenced years earlier.

In the absence of any official acknowledgement of the 1988 prison massacre, the most credible account of these events comes from the memoirs of Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, who was at the time one of the highest ranking government officials in Iran and the designated successor of Ayatollah Khomeini, then the Supreme Leader.

According to Ayatollah Montazeri, the government formed a three-person committee to oversee the purge in each prison.<sup>6</sup> The authorities told these committees to interview all political prisoners and to order the execution of those deemed “unrepentant.” These committees became known as “Death Committees” [*Heya't Marg*]. Each comprised a prosecutor, a judge, and a representative of the Ministry of Information. Mustafa Pour-Mohammadi represented the Ministry of Information on the committee at Tehran’s notorious Evin Prison. In a letter of protest addressed to Ayatollah Khomeini, dated August 4, 1988, Ayatollah Montazeri wrote: “The principal role [in determining which prisoners to execute] is played by the representative of the Ministry of Information everywhere and others are effectively under his direct influence.”<sup>7</sup>

Ayatollah Montazeri recounts the unfolding events that led to the massacre of prisoners:

A letter was produced on behalf of the Imam [Khomeini] stating that based on the discretion of a panel composed of a prosecutor, a judge, and a representative of the Ministry of Information, imprisoned members of the hypocrites [*monafeghin*, a term used by the government to refer to the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization] who are still believers in their cause should be executed. Decisions were to be reached based on the majority vote. Thus if two out of the three members reached a decision that a prisoner is still a believer in his cause, even though the prisoner may have already been sentenced to two or five years in prison, he would be executed.<sup>8</sup>

Ayatollah Montazeri further details the arbitrary and summary character of this process:

Visits to prisoners were suspended for a period of time and, according to people responsible for carrying out these orders, approximately two thousand and eight hundred or three thousand and eight hundred – I can not recall exactly – women and men were executed, relying on the authority of [Ayatollah Khomeini’s] letter. Even people who practiced religious rituals of prayer and fasting were asked to repent, and they would be offended and refuse. Then [the committee] would conclude that the prisoner is still a believer in his cause and ordered their executions!<sup>9</sup>

In his August 4, 1988 letter to Ayatollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Montazeri gives an example of the process of questioning prisoners and determining their fates, writing:

Three days ago a religious judge from one of the provinces – a man who is trustworthy – came to Qum and complained to me of the way your orders are being implemented. The judge told me: The Ministry of Information representative or the prosecutor – I don’t recall which one – in order to determine if a prisoner is a believer in his cause asked the prisoner: “Are you willing to condemn the hypocrites [*monafeghin*] organization?” The prisoner

answered positively. Then, the prisoner was asked: "Are you willing to give an interview?" The prisoner answered positively. He was asked: "Are you willing to go to the war front and fight the Iraqis?" He answered yes. Subsequently, the prisoner was asked: "Are you willing to walk over a mine field?" The prisoner answered, "Not everyone is willing to walk over a mine field." Following this exchange, it was determined that the prisoner is still a believer in his cause. The judge said that he insisted on reaching a decision by consensus and not by majority vote, but his request was not accepted.<sup>10</sup>

Ayatollah Montazeri identified Mustafa Pour-Mohammadi as the representative of the Ministry of Information in charge of questioning prisoners in Evin Prison and saw him as being a central figure in the mass executions of prisoners in Tehran. He recounts a meeting with Pour-Mohammadi and the two other members of the Evin Prison committee:

After my second letter of protest [to Ayatollah Khomeini], there was no change and [the executions] continued. On August 15, 1988, I met with Mr. Nayeri, who was the religious judge in Evin, Mr. Eshraghi who was the prosecutor, and Mr. Pour-Mohammadi who was the representative of the Ministry of Information. I told them that they should stop the executions during the month of Moharram. Mr. Nayeri responded: "We have so far executed seven-hundred and fifty people in Tehran, and we have identified another two-hundred and fifty people. Allow us to get rid of them and then we'll listen to you...!"<sup>11</sup>

Montazeri provides a memorandum of protest addressed to Pour-Mohammadi and the other two members of the Evin Prison "Death Committee" that he wrote on August 15, 1988. In this memorandum to Pour-Mohammadi, Montazeri wrote:

Carrying out a massacre of prisoners and captives without due process or trial will certainly help our opponent's cause in the long term. It will also encourage them to carry on armed resistance. The international community will condemn our actions.<sup>12</sup>

With regard to the 1988 mass prison executions, Amnesty International reported in 1990:

The political executions took place in many prisons in all parts of Iran, often far from where the armed incursion took place. Most of the executions were of political prisoners, including an unknown number of prisoners of conscience, who had already served a number of years in prison. They could have played no part in the armed incursion, and they were in no position to take part in spying or terrorist activities. Many of the dead had been tried and sentenced to prison terms during the early 1980s, many for non-violent offenses such as distributing newspapers and leaflets, taking part in demonstrations or collecting funds for prisoners' families. Many of the dead had been students in their teens or early twenties at the time of their arrest. The majority of those killed were supporters of the PMOI [People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, another English-language name for the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization, or MKO]; but hundreds of members and supporters of other political groups, including various factions of the PFOI [People's Fedayeen Organization of Iran], the Tudeh [Communist] Party, the KDPI [Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran], Rah-e Kargar [Workers Party] and others, were also among the execution victims.<sup>13</sup>

Ayatollah Montazeri, citing officials in charge of carrying out the executions, puts the number of executed prisoners between 2,800 and 3,800, but he acknowledges that his recollection is not exact. Iranian activists have published the names of 4,481 executed prisoners.<sup>14</sup> As long as the government refuses to announce a complete list of those executed or even to acknowledge that these executions took place, the extent of this massacre remains unknown.

The families of executed prisoners have repeatedly written to the government officials asking for the number of executed prisoners and their place of burials. In January 2003, they also wrote to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights at the time, Mary Robinson, and the then-chairman of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detentions, Louis Joinet, seeking their help in determining the truth behind the mass executions.<sup>15</sup> According to the families of some of the executed prisoners, the bodies of many are buried in unmarked graves and mass graves in the hills of Tehran's Khavaran district. Families often congregate in Khavaran to remember their executed relatives.<sup>16</sup>

Families of some of the executed prisoners told Human Rights Watch that in September 2005 the new government started to reconfigure the Khavaran site and that makeshift gravestones, put in place by the families, have been destroyed. They said that the government is preparing for a major overhaul of this area to destroy any evidence of burials.

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[6] Ayatollah Montazeri, *Khaterat*, Vol. 1, p. 623, <http://www.amontazeri.com>, last accessed September 8, 2005. Translated by Human Rights Watch.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 633.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 623.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 628.

[10] *Ibid.*, pg 633.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 635. Moharram, the month when Imam Hussein, the third Imam of the Shi`a, was killed in battle in 680 CE, is one of the most revered months for the Shi`a.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 635.

[13] "Iran: Violations of Human Rights 1987-1990," Amnesty International, Index: MDE 13/2/90.

[14] The list of executed prisoners is available at <http://www.asre-nou.net> . Last accessed October 24, 2005.

[15] The texts of these three letters is available at [http://www.bidaran.com/article.php3?id\\_article=25](http://www.bidaran.com/article.php3?id_article=25) , last accessed on October 24, 2005.

[16] Information on Khavaran is available at [http://www.bidaran.com/rubrique.php3?id\\_rubrique=13](http://www.bidaran.com/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=13) , last accessed on October, 24, 2005.

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