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Iran: At least 23 children killed by security forces in November protests – new evidence

4 March 2020, 00:00 UTC

An investigation by Amnesty International has uncovered evidence that at least 23 children were killed by Iranian security forces in the nationwide protests in November last year.

At least 22 of the children were shot dead by Iranian security forces unlawfully firing live ammunition at unarmed protesters and bystanders, according to the findings.

The children killed include 22 boys, aged between 12 and 17, and a girl reportedly aged between eight and 12. Details of their deaths are included in a new Amnesty International briefing, [‘They shot our children’ - Killings of minors in Iran’s November 2019 protests](#).

“In recent months an increasingly gruesome picture has emerged of the extent to which Iranian security forces unlawfully used lethal force to crush last year’s nationwide protests. However, it is still devastating to learn that the number of children who fell victim to this brutality is so shockingly high,” said Philip Luther, Research and Advocacy Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.

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Amnesty International has gathered evidence from videos and photographs, as well as death and burial certificates, accounts from eyewitnesses and victims’ relatives, friends and acquaintances on the ground, and information gathered from human rights activists and journalists.

In 10 cases, Amnesty International learned from the description of injuries on the death or burial certificates it reviewed, or information from credible sources, that the deaths occurred as a result of gunshots to the head or torso – indicating that the security forces were shooting to kill.

In two of the cases, burial certificates set out in detail the devastating impact on the children’s bodies. One cited injuries including bleeding, a crushed brain and a shattered skull. The other indicated that the cause of the death was extensive internal bleeding, and a pierced heart and lung.

In one child’s case, there are conflicting reports on the cause of death, with one referring to fatal head injuries sustained by beatings by security forces and another referring to the firing of metal pellets at the victim’s face from a close distance.

Twelve of the 23 deaths recorded by Amnesty International took place on 16 November, a further eight on 17 November, and three on 18 November. The protests started on 15 November.

The 23 children are recorded as having been killed in 13 cities in six provinces across the country (Esfahan, Fars, Kermanshah, Khuzestan, Kurdistan and Tehran), reflecting the widespread nature of the bloody crackdown.

“The fact that the vast majority of the children’s deaths took place over just two days is further evidence that Iranian security forces went on a killing spree to quash dissent at any cost,” said Philip Luther.

“As the Iranian authorities have refused to open independent, impartial and effective investigations, it is imperative that member states of the UN Human Rights Council mandate an inquiry into the killings of protesters and bystanders, including these children, in the November protests.”

On 25 February, Amnesty International wrote to Iran’s Minister of Interior Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli to provide him with the list of the names of the 23 children recorded as killed, along with their ages and places of death, and to seek the authorities’ comments on the circumstances of their death. As of 3 March, the organization had received no response.

State cover-up and harassment

Amnesty International spoke to relatives of some the children killed who described being subjected to harassment and intimidation, including surveillance and interrogations by intelligence and security officials. At least one family received veiled death threats against their surviving children, and were warned that “something horrible” would also happen to them if they spoke out.

This corresponds with a broader issue where families of those killed in protests are being intimidated by the state from talking openly about their deaths. Most have reported being forced to sign undertakings that they would not speak to the media, and observe restrictions on how they commemorate their loved ones in order to be able to receive their bodies. In many cases, security and intelligence officials have placed the families under surveillance, and attended their funeral and memorial ceremonies in order to ensure that the restrictions are observed.

Families of children killed also reported being forced to bury them quickly in the presence of security and intelligence officials, thereby preventing them from seeking an independent autopsy. Such conduct appears aimed at suppressing incriminating evidence.

In general, Amnesty International’s research has found that the families of those killed in protests have been consistently excluded from autopsies undertaken by the state forensic institute and denied access to information on the circumstances of their deaths, including details of the ammunition that killed them and the weapon that fired it.

In some cases, officials washed and prepared the bodies of victims for burial without notifying their families and then handed them the bodies, wrapped in shrouds, just minutes before the scheduled burial. Amnesty International understands that in these cases, security and intelligence officials generally sought to prevent families from pulling back the shrouds to see the bodies of their loved ones. As a result, some families say they were not able to see the impact of injuries.

In other cases, authorities have also refused to hand over the belongings of the victims to their relatives, including their phones, raising suspicions that they worried these contained evidence of unlawful actions by the state.

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“As if the loss of their loved ones was not cruel enough an experience to bear, families of children killed during the protests are facing a ruthless campaign of harassment to intimidate them from speaking out,” said Philip Luther.

“The authorities also seem to be desperate to prevent bereaved relatives finding out the full truth about the killings, and getting hold of evidence that would incriminate those responsible. This bears all the hallmarks of a state cover-up.”

Background

Protests erupted in Iran on 15 November 2019 following a sudden government announcement about a fuel price hike. According to credible reports compiled by Amnesty International, [at least 304 people were killed](#) and thousands injured between 15 and 18 November as authorities crushed the protests using lethal force. During and following the protests, the Iranian authorities arbitrarily detained thousands of detainees and subjected some to enforced disappearance, torture and other ill-treatment.

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