

IRAN'S 1988 PRISONER MASSACRE
Hon. David Kilgour, J.D.,
Co-chair, Canadian Friends of a Democratic Iran
Auditorium, Sir Sandford Fleming Building
University of Toronto
3 August 2013

In the summer of 1988, the Iranian government murdered tens of thousands of political prisoners held in jails across the country. The regime has since neither acknowledged these crimes nor provided information on which and how many of its citizens perished.

Most of the victims were either serving sentences for political activities or had already completed their sentences but were still in custody without cause. Some had been imprisoned and released, but were re-arrested and murdered. Many were young men and women; some were in their teens.

The killings began in late July and continued for approximately five months. By the time they ended, an estimated 30,000 political prisoners, an estimated ninety per cent of which were supporters of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK), were dead.

Ahmed Hassani will speak shortly about his late brother, Mahmoud, who was in prison for seven years before he was murdered. Ahmed and his late wife Frough were part of a hunger strike in Ottawa in early 1989 over the calamity in Iran. Neither Canada's nor any other government responded seriously to the event at the time or afterwards.

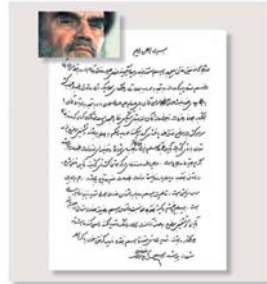


Mass grave of some victims of the 1988 massacre

Khomeini Death Decrees

In the final phases of the Iran-Iraq war, then Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, who had then concluded that defeat for Iran was imminent, decided to take revenge on political opponents. He issued *fatwas*, ordering the death of anyone who had not “repented” and was still unwilling to collaborate fully with his regime. The waves of killings soon began; each day, hundreds of prisoners were hanged and their bodies were buried hurriedly in mass graves in major cities.

Khomeini decreed, "Whoever at any stage continues to belong to the Monafeqin (PMOI/MEK) must be executed. Annihilate the enemies of Islam immediately." Even more delusionally, he added: "... Those who are in prisons throughout the country and remain steadfast in their support for MEK/PMOI are waging war on God and are condemned to execution...It is naive to show mercy to those who wage war on God".



Khomeini "Death Decree" for political prisoners in 1988

“Death Commission”

Khomeini’s "Amnesty Commission" soon became a "Death Commission". It comprised three individuals: a representative of the ministry of intelligence, a religious judge and a prosecutor. Final word rested with the ministry official. They held ‘trials’, which often lasted only a few minutes and were simply interrogations. Questions focused on whether an accused still held any ongoing allegiance to the PMOI/MEK. In reality, more than 90 per cent of the inmate populations had such an allegiance. If those being “tried” were unwilling to collaborate totally with the regime against the PMOI/MEK, the commission viewed this as sympathy to that organization and the sentence was immediate execution. The Death Commission task was to determine whether a prisoner was an “enemy of God”. In the case of Mojahedin prisoners, this was often done after a single question about party affiliation. Those who replied "Mojahedin", rather than the derogatory "Monafeqin", were sent to be hanged.



Five members of “Death commission”

Designated successor protests haste of executions of prisoners

Khomeini demanded total obedience from regime officials. All had to support the massacre or be fired. The rush to execute was so inhuman that some closest to

Khomeini, most notably Hossein Ali Montazeri, his then designated successor, protested. In letters to Khomeini, Montazeri urged leniency and slowing down the campaign. Khomeini replied that there should be mercy for no one, including teenagers. Pregnant women, he added, should neither be spared nor allowed to give birth and should be executed immediately.

In December 2000, Montazeri published his memoirs. The book revealed shocking documents on a number of atrocities committed by the regime, but none as outrageous as the massacre of 30,000 jailed political opponents in 1988. Montazeri's book carried special weight because at the time of the murders he was the officially ordained successor to Khomeini and the second highest authority in the land. The book was not the first publication telling the world about the tragedy. News had begun to trickle out through the curtain of censorship imposed by the mullahs in their attempt to maintain a complete blackout on the crime.



Text of Montazeri letter to Khomeini on July 31, 1988, complaining that mass execution of PMOI/MEK prisoners would enhance their popular appeal.

Hassan Rouhani

Hassan Rouhani, Iran's president inaugurated today, was Deputy Commander-in-chief of the armed forces in 1988. Since 1982, he had been a member of the regime's Supreme Defense Council and a member of Central Council of War Logistics Headquarters. In those positions, he was no doubt aware of Khomeini's mass murders if not in support of them. The widespread international view that Rouhani is today moderate and reform-minded is thus open to question. With all other senior officials of the regime, he should also be held accountable for any direct involvement in this crime against humanity. (Canada's Kaveh Shahrooz notes on Aug 4 that it is not encouraging here to see that Rouhani's proposed Minister of Justice is someone implicated in the '88 massacre.)

In 2008, twenty years after the massacre, Amnesty International renewed its call for those responsible for the 'prison massacre' to be held accountable. "There should be no impunity for such gross human rights violations, regardless of when they were

committed." AI added, "Those responsible for the killings - one of the worst abuses to be committed in Iran - should be prosecuted and tried before a regularly and legally constituted court and with all necessary procedural guarantees, in accordance with international fair trial standards."

Justice

The 1988 massacre is one of the least exposed mass murders in recent world history. The Iranian regime has been largely successful in keeping it largely unknown to most of the international community and even from many Iranians. Many know of the reign of terror that followed the Islamic Revolution in 1979, including the regime's assassinations abroad and "chain murders" that targeted opposition intellectuals and activists in the late 1990s. Tragically, there is still little public awareness at home and abroad of the 1988 event.

There have been no prosecutions of those who planned and carried out the murders. The Tehran government continues to deny that the 1988 elimination of opposition prisoners even occurred. None of the perpetrators has been brought to justice and none of the regime's senior officials, including the current Supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, has been held accountable in any way. The silence of the past twenty-five years should end. The UN should launch an independent investigation on one of the most hideous crimes against humanity since the Second World War.

CANADA RECOGNIZES MASSACRE AS CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY

Canada is the first country to have initiated action at the parliamentary level to condemn the massacre as crime against humanity. The text of the motion adopted unanimously by our House of Commons on June 5, 2013, reads:

"That this House condemns the mass murder of political prisoners in Iran in the summer of 1988 as constituting crimes against humanity, honours the memory of the victims buried in mass graves at Khavaran cemetery and other locations in Iran, and establishes September 1st as a day of solidarity with political prisoners in Iran."

Summer 2013

In mid-2013, some of the perpetrators of the crimes hold some the highest positions in Tehran, including Khamenei, who was the president at the time, Rafsanjani, Rouhani (the new president), Khatami and many others. None of the Iranian regime's elite from any faction can claim clean hands over the massacre. They all knew about it and presumably did nothing. Many of the victims were among Iran's brightest young people; virtually all the doomed freedom fighters were supporters of the PMOI/MEK-a key point that is rarely mentioned.

In February 2001, an article appeared in the U.K. *Sunday Telegraph* with the headline "Khomeini Fatwa led to killing of 30,000 in Iran". The piece noted:

“According to testimony from prison officials... they would line up prisoners in a 14-by-five- metre hall in the central office building and then ask one question: “What is your political affiliation?” Those who said the Mojahedin would be hanged from cranes in position in the car park behind the building. He went on to describe how every half an hour from 7.30 am to 5 pm, 33 people were lifted on three forklift trucks to six cranes, each of which had five or six ropes. The process went on and on without interruption, he said. In two weeks, 8000 people were hanged. Similar carnage took place across the country.”

The article also noted that the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) had prepared files on 21 senior members of the regime it alleged were ‘principle protagonists of the massacre’, including Khatami, who was president in 2001, and Khomeini, Iran’s then Supreme Leader. Mohammad Mohaddessin, chairman of the NCRI foreign affairs committee, travelled to New York in 2001 to present the files to the UN and call for a tribunal to try them for crimes against humanity.

It is unacceptable that 25 years later not one of the high-ranking officials has yet been held accountable for this appalling mass murder. The UN officials, who received the files and documents from Mohaddessin in 2001, failed to take action. All of us here today want to put an end to impunity over this matter.

It is useful that Canada’s MPs have now recognized the massacre as a crime against humanity, but all of us here today want our country and its government to do more to bring the perpetrators to justice. We ask the Harper government to propose the formation of an international fact-finding mission to investigate fully the massacre, followed presumably by indictments and trials in the International Criminal Court at Ottawa’s request. This will inevitably be a step towards a democratic change in Iran.

Camps Ashraf and Liberty

Finally, compare the brave Mojahedin supporters massacred in 1988 and their unarmed female and male counterparts now in Camp Liberty, Iraq. It is for the same reasons that the Iranian regime wants to massacre them. They are not in Iran’s prisons, so it is more difficult for the regime to achieve its goal despite its determination and help from the current Iraqi government.

On the 25th anniversary of the crime against humanity of 1988, we are also determined and firm in urging the U.N., U.S. and other governments, including Canada’s, to ensure the security of the residents and prevent their massacre. A good first step would be their return to Camp Ashraf, which is a relatively safer sanctuary.

Thank you.