



Tuesday 21 April 2015

To: Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

CC:
Ahmed Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran;
Rita Izsák, UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues

Mister High Commissioner,

We call on your office to investigate the ongoing harassment of the family of Younes Asakerah, an Ahwazi Arab man who died after an act of self-immolation in apparent protest against the confiscation of his produce stall.

According to sources close to the case, local authorities in the southwestern Iranian city of Khorramshahr [*Mohammareh* in Arabic] had repeatedly confiscated a produce stall belonging to Mr. Asakerah, a street vendor and father of two children. The last confiscation took place on 13 March as the municipality was reportedly clearing unlicensed stalls in preparation for state-organized tours to the city.

On 14 March 2015, Mr. Asakerah went to the Municipal Office to request a permit as directed by the relevant authorities. Once there, municipal officials allegedly denied his request and told him to leave. A source says that Mr. Asakerah threatened that he would commit suicide by setting himself on fire but officials ignored him. That same day he went to a petrol station where he purchased a can of petrol. He returned to the Municipal Office and burnt himself in front of the building. Mr. Asakerah suffered burns on 92 percent of his body and died eight days later on 22 March in Motahhari Hospital in Tehran.

Sources close to the case claim that the authorities failed to properly react to Mr. Asakerah's condition. Hospitals in Khorramshahr and Ahvaz [*Ahwaz* in Arabic], where he was initially transferred, were unable to help. The family was reportedly forced to collect donations in order to hire an ambulance to transfer him to Motahhari hospital in Tehran for special care at an advanced burn unit. Sources believe that Mr. Asakerah's medical care in Tehran did not come quickly enough.

Mr. Asakerah's death quickly gained attention on social media and in Arabic language media and triggered larger protests in several Arab-majority cities in the province, included Ahvaz and Khorramshahr. Protestors who took to the streets chanted anti-government slogans and in

some cases clashed with security forces. In Ahwaz, according to media reports, authorities arrested approximately 1000 people during a protest that ensued on 17 March after a football match in which a banner was displayed in the crowd that read in Arabic, "We are all Younis." A police spokesman announced via news media that most protesters have been released after signing pledges, but did not specify the content of the pledges. However, local sources claim that some of those arrested are still being detained and are facing criminal charges.

In the weeks after Younis Asakerah's death, members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), intelligence officers, and municipal officials visited Mr. Asakerah's family and wife on several occasions, a source reported. It is alleged that these officials harassed and threatened the family, demanding they not speak publicly about Mr. Asakerah's death. The most recent confirmed visit to Asakerah's family by the authorities occurred on 3 April. The source adds that Motahhari Hospital initially refused to hand over Mr. Asakerah's body to his family, claiming they had received orders from intelligence services not to release the body. The body was only released after the authorities detained his father, brother and a tribal leader for eight hours on 22 March and reportedly forced them to sign a document promising to hold quiet mourning and funeral services outside of the city. Family members and friends also had to collect money to pay for the transfer of his body back to Khorramshahr and for funeral services.

Khuzestan Province, where Khorramshahr is located, has a sizable Arab population. The province suffers from high unemployment, underdevelopment, inadequate housing, poor access to healthcare services, and air and water pollution. Ahwazi Arabs in Iran also face broad discrimination, particularly with regard to economic and social rights. Local human rights activists are routinely imprisoned under vaguely-worded national security laws. Since 2005, the province has seen dozens of large-scale anti-government protests.

Our organizations are concerned that Younes Asakerah's family is under constant risk of harassment and detention by Iranian authorities and that the risk will continue as long as Asakerah's case is a rallying point for members of the province's Arab community. As such we request that your offices look into this matter and call on the Iranian government to account for the treatment Asakerah's family and ensure that no harassment is taking place. The freedom of expression and assembly of the family should be respected and the government should safeguard their right to mourn their loved one's death and air grievances with local officials. We ask that the OHCHR urge the Iranian government to take appropriate action against any agents of the state found to have abused the rights of Mr. Asakerah's family.

We thank you for addressing this matter.

Sincerely,

Roya Boroumand, Executive Director
Abdollah Boroumand Foundation

Karim Abdian, Executive Director
Ahwaz Human Rights Organization

Kamran Ashtary, Executive Director
Arseh Sevom

Alirza Quluncu, Representative
The Association for Defence of Azerbaijani Political Prisoners in Iran

Duman Radmehr, Executive Director
Association for Human Rights of the Azerbaijani People in Iran

Taimoor Aliassi, UN Representative
Association pour les Droits Humains au Kurdistan d'Iran-Genève (KMMK-G)

Mansoor Bibak, Co-Director
Balochistan Human Rights Group

Yousef Azizi Banitorof, Secretary
Center for Combating Racism and Discrimination Against Arabs in Iran

Dr. Shirin Ebadi, Founder and President
Center for Supporters of Human Rights

Raphaël Chenuil-Hazan, Executive Director
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Ibrahim Al Arabi, Executive Director
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Keyvan Rafiee, Executive Director
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Mani Mostofi, Director
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Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam, Executive Director
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Tara Fatehi, Spokesperson
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Mahmood Enayat, Director
Small Media

Hassan Nayeb Hashem, Representative to the Human Rights Council in Geneva
Südwind: All Human Rights for All in Iran

Firuzeh Mahmoudi, Executive Director
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