



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
4 March 2024

English only

---

## Human Rights Council

### Fifty-fifth session

26 February–5 April 2024

Agenda item 4

**Human rights situations that require the Council's attention**

**Joint written statement\* submitted by Women's Human Rights International Association, Edmund Rice International Limited, France Libertes : Fondation Danielle Mitterrand, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status, International Society for Human Rights, a non-governmental organization on the roster**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[4 February 2024]

---

\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



## **Time for a United Nations Inquiry into the 1988 Massacre in the Islamic Republic of Iran**

It is high time for a United Nations-mandated body to investigate the 1988 massacre of political prisoners in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Numerous credible international NGOs have previously documented the enforced disappearance and extrajudicial killing of thousands of prisoners by Iranian authorities between late July and September 1988 for their political opinions and religious beliefs (1).

In a report (2) to the UN General Assembly on 14 August 2017, then-UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Asma Jahangir, wrote:

“Between July and August 1988, thousands of political prisoners, men, women and teenagers, were reportedly executed pursuant to a fatwa issued by the then Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. A three-man commission was reportedly created with a view to determining who should be executed.”

“Over the years, a high number of reports have been issued about the 1988 massacres. If the number of persons who disappeared and were executed can be disputed, overwhelming evidence shows that thousands of persons were summarily killed. Recently, these killings have been acknowledged by some at the highest levels of the State. The families of the victims have a right to know the truth about these events and the fate of their loved ones without risking reprisal. They have the right to a remedy, which includes the right to an effective investigation of the facts and public disclosure of the truth; and the right to reparation.”

### **Khomeini’s Fatwa**

Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa (3) in July 1988 ordering the execution of imprisoned opponents, including those who had already been tried and were serving their prison terms. The text of the fatwa was later published in the memoirs of Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, who in 1988 was Khomeini’s heir-apparent.

Khomeini’s decree called for the execution of all political prisoners affiliated to the People’s Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (PMOI or MEK), who remained steadfast in their beliefs. There have been reports that another decree was issued regarding members of other groups, namely the Marxists, although no such decree has ever been published.

### **“Death Commissions”**

In his decree, Khomeini ordered the formation of three-member panels nationwide, known among prisoners as “Death Commissions”, to implement his order. These Commissions were formed on 19 July 1988 (4), one day after the Islamic Republic of Iran accepted a ceasefire in its eight-year war with Iraq.

Each panel included a religious judge, prosecutor (or deputy prosecutor) and representative from the Ministry of Intelligence. According to survivors’ accounts, it took only minutes for the commissions to decide on the fate of each prisoner.

The procedures were very simple. According to survivors, prison authorities summoned individual detainees one by one and posed a series of questions. Foremost among these inquiries was whether or not the prisoners were willing to denounce the PMOI. If they answered in the negative, it would invariably lead to a death sentence. In instances where detainees refrained from openly expressing allegiance to the PMOI, they were subjected to further scrutiny. They were typically required to meet additional criteria, such as agreeing to make a coerced “confession” on television, wherein they would denounce the PMOI.

The Islamic Republic of Iran’s current President Ebrahim Raisi was previously a member of the Tehran Death Commission.

## Buried in Mass Graves

Once executed, the victims' bodies were packed in trucks and transferred to various locations throughout the country and buried in mass graves.

In 2017, JVMI published a list(5) of 59 mass graves where the bodies of the victims were allegedly buried in secret.

In 2018, Amnesty International and Justice for Iran published a joint report(6) alleging that the Iranian authorities were destroying or damaging mass grave sites across the Islamic Republic of Iran that were believed to contain the remains of the victims.

The aftermath of the 1988 massacre was further compounded by the authorities' refusal to inform grieving families of the fate of their loved ones or where they were buried. Families were prohibited from holding any form of memorial ceremony or displaying photographs of their executed loved ones in public or even in their homes. Additionally, families were forbidden from participating in public protests related to the deaths.

## The Victims

Survivors of the 1988 massacre, (7) along with some former officials, have provided varying estimates of the staggering number of political prisoners who fell victim to extrajudicial executions or enforced disappearances. As many as 30,000 are estimated to have been executed.

## Iranian Civil Society Demands Justice

Since the summer of 2016, Iranian civil society has defied the government by breaking the taboo on openly discussing the massacre and demanding justice.

Iranian political prisoner Maryam Akbari-Monfared on 15 October 2016 made an official complaint from inside prison to the Iranian judiciary over the execution of her siblings in the 1988 massacre. In response to her pursuit of accountability, she has faced increased pressure while incarcerated, including the denial of visitations and her forced exile to a remote location, far from her children.

Despite having already served more than 14 years of a 15-year prison sentence, Ms. Akbari-Monfared was informed in December 2023 that she had been sentenced to an additional three years in prison. She has been told by prison guards that she will not be released until she retracts her call for accountability over the murder of her siblings.

## Key Developments

In its 2018 report (8) *Blood-soaked secrets: Why the Islamic Republic of Iran's 1988 prison massacres are ongoing crimes against humanity*, Amnesty International concluded that, in addition to committing the crime against humanity of murder in 1988, by extrajudicially executing thousands of political dissidents in secret, the Iranian authorities are committing the ongoing crimes against humanity of enforced disappearance, persecution, torture and other inhumane acts, including by systematically concealing the fate of the victims and the whereabouts of their remains.

Seven UN Special Rapporteurs wrote to the Iranian authorities on 3 September 2020 (9), stating that the 1988 extrajudicial executions may amount to "crimes against humanity."

Their letter stated that the failure of UN bodies to act over the 1988 massacre has "had a devastating impact on the survivors and families" and "emboldened" the authorities to "conceal the fate of the victims and to maintain a strategy of deflection and denial."

On 29 June 2021, in an interview with Reuters, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javād Rehmān, called for (10) an independent inquiry into the 1988 state-ordered executions and the role played by Ebrahim Raisi as Tehran deputy prosecutor. Prof.

Rehman said that his office was ready to share gathered testimonies and evidence if the Human Rights Council or another body sets up an impartial investigation. He added that he was concerned at reports that some "mass graves" were being destroyed as part of a continuing cover-up.

On 12 August 2022, the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) in a report (11) to the Human Rights Council called for an "international investigation" into the 1988 massacre. The report stated:

### **The Islamic Republic of Iran**

The Working Group reiterates the concerns expressed about the ongoing concealment of burial sites of those forcibly disappeared and allegedly executed between July and September 1988 across the country. The Working Group recalls that an enforced disappearance continues until the fate and whereabouts of the individual concerned is established and repeats its support for an international investigation on the matter.

In his report (12) of 7 February 2023 to the 52nd session of the Human Rights Council, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Islamic Republic of Iran highlighted the ongoing deadly crackdown on peaceful protesters and linked it to the issue of impunity.

In his recommendations, the Special Rapporteur urged the international community to continue to prioritize human rights issues by:

"Supporting accountability efforts with respect to human rights violations and possible crimes under international criminal law committed since the start of the protests in September 2022, as well as calling for accountability with respect to longstanding emblematic events that have been met with persistent impunity, including the enforced disappearances and summary and arbitrary executions of 1988 and the protests of November 2019".

### **Time to End Impunity in the Islamic Republic of Iran**

Lack of accountability for the perpetrators of the 1988 massacre has emboldened the Iranian authorities to commit further atrocities against dissident protesters and political prisoners, as was witnessed during the deadly crackdown on the nationwide protests of 2022.

It is high time that the UN Member States urgently establish an inquiry into the 1988 mass executions and enforced disappearances in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Human Rights Council should also support the pursuit of accountability for Iranian officials who have committed major crimes that violate international law, such as the 1988 massacre and the brutal crackdowns on previous and current protests.

---

Hands off Cain, Nouveaux Droits de l'Homme (France), Justice for Victims of 1988 Massacre in Iran (JVMI), Association des femmes Iraniennes en France (AFIF), Comité de Soutien aux Droits de l'Homme en Iran (CSDHI), Associazione delle Donne Democratiche Iraniane in Italia, Association of Anglo-Iranian Women in the UK, Iran Libero e Democratico (Italia), Iranian youth association in Switzerland, Association de Réfugiés politiques pour les droits de l'homme – France, Associazione Medici e Farmacisti Democratici Iraniani in Italia, Association des jeunes Iraniens pour la démocratie et la liberté-Luxembourg, Association IranRef (Belgique), Iranska Kvinnosamfundet i Sverige (Sweden), Anglo-Iranian Professionals Association of Iranian Political Prisoners-UK, Associazione Italiana per i Diritti Umani in Iran, NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.

1 - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/9421/2018/en/>

2 - <https://undocs.org/en/A/72/322>

3 - <https://iran1988.org/khomeini-decrees-execution-of-steadfast-monafeqin-mojahedin-in-prisons/>

- 4 - Remarks by US State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus, 17 July 2020:  
<https://twitter.com/statedeptspox/status/1284216751941652484>
- 5 - <https://iran1988.org/new-report-published-1988massacre-iran-evidence-crime-humanity/>
- 6 - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/8259/2018/en/>
- 7 - <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/irans-leaders-are-responsible-for-executing-30000-political-prisoners/>
- 8 - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/9421/2018/en/>
- 9 - <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=25503>
- 10 - <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/exclusive-un-expert-backs-probe-into-irans-1988-killings-raisis-role-2021-06-29/>
- 11 - <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/51/31>
- 12 - <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/52/67>