

URGENT ACTION

ROAD TO BE BUILT OVER INDIVIDUAL AND MASS GRAVES

The families of political dissidents who were forcibly disappeared and extrajudicially killed in Ahvaz, southern Iran, in the 1980s are suffering untold mental anguish and distress as the authorities are destroying the individual and mass graves of their loved ones. They are afraid of facing further persecution if they speak out.

The Iranian authorities are building a road over a mass grave and dozens of individual graves in Ahvaz, Khuzestan province, that contain the remains of dozens of political dissidents, both men and women, who were forcibly disappeared and extrajudicially killed in the 1980s including during the mass killings of 1988. Since 20 July 2018, photo and video evidence has surfaced, which appears to show that the concrete structure marking the mass grave as well as dozens of individual graves have been smashed to pieces. The graves are now hidden beneath piles of dirt and debris. According to an official board placed at the site, the purpose of the project is to build a “boulevard” and create a 21-acre park. The board notes that the project is supervised by the Municipality of Ahvaz.

Families of the victims in Ahvaz first learned that a construction project was underway in May 2017. According to information received by Amnesty International from human rights defenders outside Iran, municipal officials had previously promised the families that the road under construction would not go over the individual and mass graves. However, when families visited the site on 20 July 2018, they saw that the authorities had destroyed the graves. An eyewitness has reported that in the following days barbed wire was put around the site and it is now under heavy surveillance. The destruction of the graves follows a three-decade long campaign of enforced disappearance by the authorities which has involved concealing the truth about the fate and whereabouts of those extrajudicially killed in 1988, denying families the right to receive and bury the remains of their loved ones according to their traditions, desecrating the grave site by turning it into a rubbish dump, forbidding mourning rituals, and cracking down on any critical public discussion about the killings. The anguish and distress caused to the families by the authorities’ decisions to forcibly disappear and secretly execute their loved ones, to conceal the whereabouts of their remains, and to desecrate their graves constitute a form of torture or other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment against the families, prohibited under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

1) TAKE ACTION

Write a letter, send an email, call, fax or tweet:

- Immediately stop the destruction of individual and mass graves belonging to the victims of the mass killings of 1980s and respect families’ right to bury their relatives in dignity;
- Stop the harassment of families seeking truth, justice and reparation, and conduct a thorough, independent and effective criminal investigation of the enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings of 1980s, including efforts to cover up the crimes, and bring to justice those suspected of criminal responsibility in fair trials, without recourse to the death penalty;
- Recognize that mass graves are crime scenes that require forensic expertise to undertake exhumations to determine the identity of the remains and the circumstances of what happened and enable families to receive the remains of their loved ones.

Contact these two officials by 6 September, 2018:

Mayor of Ahvaz
Mansour Katanbaf
City Council, Amanieh Street,
Sepah Avenue, Ahwaz, Iran
Telephone: (061) 3333 20 89
Email: info@ahvaz.ir
Salutation: Dear Mayor

H.E. Gholamali Khoshroo
Permanent Representative,
Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations
622 Third Avenue, 34th Floor
New York, NY 10017
Phone: 212 687-2020 | Fax: 212 867 7086
Email: iran@un.int
Salutation: Dear Mr. Khoshroo

2) LET US KNOW YOU TOOK ACTION

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

During the early 1980s, the authorities of the newly founded Islamic Republic executed thousands of political dissidents, including prisoners of conscience, without trial or after flagrantly unfair and shambolic “trials” in prisons that lasted only a few minutes. In many cases, the authorities never returned the bodies to the families and directed them to individual graves located on the outskirts of cemeteries and said that their relatives were buried there.

Thousands were also sentenced to lengthy prison terms, often imposed for their peaceful dissent, including for distributing newspapers and leaflets and having real or perceived affiliations with various political opposition groups. Many of these prisoners remained detained until the mass killings and enforced disappearances of 1988 which began shortly after the end of Iran-Iraq war and an unsuccessful armed incursion that year by the then Iraq-based People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran, a banned opposition group which advocates the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. Prisoners from across the country were made incommunicado, and no news of them was heard for months afterwards. Reports circulated among relatives that prisoners were being executed in groups and buried in unmarked mass graves. Distraught family members searched the cemeteries for signs of freshly dug trenches. From late 1988 onwards, families were verbally informed by judicial authorities or prison officials that their relatives had been killed. However, the bodies were not returned and most locations of burial were not disclosed. Today, the number of victims from the mass killings of 1988 is still not known; minimum estimates by human rights organizations range from 4,000 to 5,000. No Iranian official has been investigated or brought to justice. Some of those suspected of criminal responsibility continue to hold influential positions, including in the judiciary and Ministry of Justice.

In Ahvaz, families of prisoners executed in 1988 have said that several Revolutionary Guards officials took them to a barren piece of land in November 1988, showed them a concrete slab, and said that their relatives were buried beneath it. Families believe that the authorities poured concrete over the mass grave immediately after the burial to prevent them from digging up the ground and recovering the bodies. In the vicinity of this mass grave, there are also dozens of individual graves of dissidents who were executed in the early 1980s. Amnesty International understands that many of the bodies were buried by the authorities in that location, without the families’ knowledge or consent.

Over the past three decades, the Iranian authorities have been bulldozing, constructing buildings and roads, dumping rubbish or building new burial plots over individual and mass graves related to the mass killings of the 1980s. These actions by the Iranian authorities are destroying key evidence that could be used to establish the truth about the scale of the crimes and obtain justice and reparation for the victims and their families. These sites have been under constant surveillance by security agencies, which suggests that judicial, intelligence and security bodies are involved in the decision making processes related to their desecration and destruction (see *Criminal cover-up: Iran destroying mass graves of victims of 1988 killings*, Index: MDE 13/8259/2018).

The Iranian authorities’ continued practice of systematically concealing the fate and whereabouts of the victims of the 1988 mass prison killings amounts in each case to enforced disappearance, which is a crime under international law. According to the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, “a detention followed by an extrajudicial execution is an enforced disappearance proper, if ... subsequent to the detention, or even after the execution was carried out, State officials refuse to disclose the fate or whereabouts of the persons concerned or refuse to acknowledge the act having been perpetrated at all.”

Name: Families in Ahvaz

Gender m/f: both

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