

Iran: Reveal Fate of Arab Minority Prisoners

Reports Suggest Activists Were Executed

JUNE 21, 2012

Recommend

(New York) – Iranian authorities should immediately provide information regarding the whereabouts and well-being of seven men from the country’s ethnic Arab minority who are known to be in Iranian custody. Human Rights Watch is concerned that prison authorities in the southwestern city of Ahvaz may have executed at least four of the seven men in recent days, and have so far refused to hand over the bodies to their families. Iranian authorities should immediately suspend use of the death penalty.

Sources close to the families of three brothers – Taha Heidarian, 28; Abbas Heidarian, 25; and Abdul-Rahman Heidarian, 23 – told Human Rights Watch that on June 17 authorities notified the family that the three had been executed. Two weeks ago, prison authorities had transferred the brothers, along with three other prisoners, from Karun prison’s general ward to an unknown location. Another brother was arrested and also taken to an unknown location when he inquired about their whereabouts. The brothers’ families had not received any information since their transfer, raising fears that four of the men, who had been sentenced to death, would be executed within days. The fourth man believed to have been executed is Ali Naami Sharifi.

“Prison officials need to let the families of these men know what has happened to their loved ones,” said [Joe Stork](#), deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. “Even when someone has been convicted of a serious crime, it doesn’t mean the person’s family should be left in the dark – and the authorities need to deliver the bodies of those executed to allow proper burial.”

Security forces arrested the Heidarian brothers and Sharifi following anti-government protests in several towns across Iran’s Arab-majority Khuzestan province on or after April 15, 2011. They alleged that the detainees were responsible for the murder of a policeman. The April 2011 protests were held to mark the sixth anniversary of the 2005 protests in Khuzestan, in which security forces opened fire to disperse demonstrators in Ahvaz and other cities and towns, [killing](#) at least 50 protesters and detaining hundreds. The demonstrators maintain that the Iranian government systematically discriminates against the Arab minority, particularly in employment, housing, and civil and political rights.

Several sources inside as well as outside Iran close to the families of the detainees told Human Rights Watch that on June 9 officials in Ahvaz’s Karun prison transferred Taha, Abbas, and Abdul-Rahman Heidarian and three others, Mansour Heidarian, Amir Moavi, and Sharifi to an unknown location. The



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Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director

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sources said that on the same day authorities also arrested Abdul-Jalil Heidarian, another Heidarian brother, when he attempted to find out more information about his brothers' case, and similarly transferred him to an unknown location. A source told Human Rights Watch that a revolutionary court has sentenced Moavi to 15 years of internal exile on national security charges, and that he is not on death row.

A revolutionary court in Ahvaz convicted the Heidarian brothers, along with Sharifi, of killing the police officer and injuring another during the April 15, 2011 protests, Iranian Arab activists told Human Rights Watch. Prosecutors are believed to have charged the men with *moharebeh* ("enmity against God") and *efsad-e fel arz* ("sowing corruption on earth"), charges that carry the death penalty. On March 5, Intelligence Ministry officials informed the detainees' families that the Supreme Court had affirmed the lower court's ruling and sentence, and said the detainees were likely to be executed imminently.

Human Rights Watch has not been able to find any public information about when and where the initial trial was held. Authorities denied the detainees regular access to their families and lawyers during the pretrial period, prompting fears that the men were subjected to torture to make them confess, the sources said.

On December 13, 2011, Press TV, a government English-language station, [aired a documentary](#) featuring three Arab men who confessed on camera that they had carried out "terrorist activities." The program alleged that the men – Hadi Rashedi, Hashem Shaabani, and Taha Heidarian – were part of a group called "*Khalq-e Arab*," and further alleged that this group was supported by the United States and United Kingdom, as well as foreign-based Iranian Arabs who fronted as human rights activists.

A source who knows both Rashedi and Shaabani previously told Human Rights Watch that they were among more than 10 residents of Khalafabad, a town about 120 kilometers southeast of Ahvaz, who had been arrested and detained by authorities since January 2011. Little information is available regarding the charges against Rashedi and Shaabani, but sources fear they may suffer the same fate as Taha Heidarian and the others.

Since May 2011, authorities have executed at least 11 Iranian Arab men and a 16-year-old boy in Karun prison for their alleged links to groups involved in attacking security forces, Human Rights Watch said. Rights activists told Human Rights Watch that at least another six people have been tortured to death in the custody of security and intelligence forces in connection with anti-government demonstrations by that swept across Khuzestan province in [April 2011](#) and [2012](#).

Human Rights Watch opposes capital punishment in all circumstances because of its irreversible, cruel, and inhumane nature.

In April 2011, Human Rights Watch [documented the use of live ammunition](#) by security forces against protesters in cities throughout Khuzestan province, killing dozens and wounding many more. No Iranian officials have been investigated in connection with these killings.

Human Rights Watch also [renewed its call](#) on Iranian authorities to allow independent international media and human rights organizations access to investigate allegations of serious rights violations in Khuzestan province.

"The high number of reported arrests and killings in Khuzestan province in recent years, combined with the information blackout, suggests that the government has terrible things it wants to hide," Stork said. "Simple justice requires the authorities to open independent and transparent investigations into the fate of those arrested and the allegations of torture."

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