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# **Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, March 24, 2009**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Scott Reid**

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## Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Tuesday, March 24, 2009

• (1235)

[Translation]

**The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)):** Today, March 24, 2009, the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development is holding its eighth meeting.

[English]

We have two witnesses with us today. Just before I introduce them, I should note, for the benefit of committee members, that this meeting is televised. I'm very pleased with that. Normally it's difficult for us to get a meeting televised, and in this hour-and-a-half slot, because we take second priority to full committees. As a consequence, the meeting on Thursday will be only an hour long, and it will start at one o'clock rather than at 12:30 in order to get a televised hearing for our next witness. However, today we have an hour and a half, and we are televised.

We have two very distinguished witnesses: Fakhteh Luna Zamani, who is president of the Association for Defence of Azerbaijani Political Prisoners in Iran; and Ahmad Batebi, who is a spokesperson for Human Rights Activists in Iran.

Madame Zamani produced a presentation, which I believe has been given to all of you. It was translated. I guess there's a map that goes with that as well, which is being circulated.

Mr. Batebi has also produced a report for us. Unfortunately, Mr. Batebi was contacted rather late by us. He had some problems getting through from the United States to Canada, and the result is that we haven't had a chance to translate his presentation into both official languages. The clerk is not permitted by our rules to distribute it, although we will get it translated as fast as possible. It is available, nevertheless, for members who wish to see it.

There is one other matter to draw to everybody's attention, and that is that Mr. Batebi was expecting he would have a translator. We tried to provide for it. Unfortunately, the clerk has informed me that the individual has not turned up. That creates a small problem. I think we'll deal with this by simply taking this very slowly. Madame Zamani has offered to assist with any translation issues that arise, if that seems reasonable to folks.

That being said, I'm going to invite our witnesses to start.

Madame Zamani, perhaps you could begin for us. Thank you.

**Mrs. Fakhteh Zamani (President, Association for Defence of Azerbaijani Political Prisoners in Iran):** Distinguished members of the House of Commons, ladies and gentlemen, as most teenagers in Canada are getting ready for their summer break, Azerbaijani-Iranian Mohammad-Reza Avaz-Pour, who is just 17, will soon start serving his 15-month prison sentence. This young activist is no stranger to detention, imprisonment, and torture. Since the age of 13, he has been arrested and tortured repeatedly for the simple non-violent act of stating that his mother tongue will not die.

Five university activists, Huseyin Huseyni, Asghar Akbarzade, Ardashir Karimi, Behruz Alizade, and journalist Rahim Ghulami, were sentenced to five years' imprisonment by the Iranian revolutionary court on February 2, 2009, for the simple act of promoting their linguistic rights. Their trials were not published and were held without a lawyer present. They were charged with establishing illegal groups with the intention of disturbing national security.

These activists will be sent far away from their homes to dangerous prisons all over the country. This exile will prevent family visits, stop the flow of information about their conditions and basic welfare, and disconnect them from the outside world. It may sound ironic to say that their families are lucky, but at least they will know where their loved ones are. On June 11, 2008, the worst fear of one family came true. Twenty days after Ferhad Mohseni was arrested by officers of the Iranian intelligence, his tortured body was handed over to his family for immediate burial. He was 25 years old.

As Iran's uranium enrichment program continues to be a focus of international attention, the human rights situation in Iran continues to deteriorate. While the activities of various student and women's rights movements, as well as individual cases of journalists, writers, scholars, and human rights defenders are somewhat known to the outside world, regrettably this is not the case with minoritized non-Persian communities. The Azerbaijanis and other non-Persian ethnic groups are Iran's invisible population. For over 80 years, all non-Persian minorities in Iran have been victims of serious human rights violations. They have endured racial discrimination, forced assimilation, and suppression of their language and culture under both the Pahlavi and Islamic governments.

However, as a person of Azerbaijani background, I'm here to speak about this particular community. The minority community might well be a numerical majority but is kept in a minority situation in terms of access to power and resources. Since early childhood, I have been exposed to racial discrimination against the ethnic group into which I was born.

As a schoolgirl, I was not allowed to speak my mother tongue, Azerbaijani Turkic. I never saw textbooks written in my language. I was not taught to read and write my language or learn about my culture and history, as Iran's only official language, Farsi, the Persian language, was imposed on us. We were forced to learn the Persian language, Persian history, and Persian culture as the common identity of all Iranians.

I have experienced my ethnic group routinely and openly insulted on radio, television, and in the state-run national press. Even now, my people are depicted as intellectually challenged and are dehumanized as donkeys and cockroaches.

Racial discrimination in Iran is still with us. Banning of all non-Farsi languages continues. Ethnic groups, particularly Turks and Semites, are dehumanized. Iranian regimes have been the biggest threat to the realization of human rights for Azerbaijanis in Iran. Paralleling the internal repression by the government, the Azerbaijanis' struggle is ignored by the international community and remains invisible to western media such as the BBC and the European broadcasts in Persian. Even Iranian human rights activists often fail to mention Azerbaijanis and other minorities when they speak of human rights violations in Iran.

• (1240)

About three years ago, after hearing of widespread arrests in the Azerbaijani region of Iran and sensing a total indifference on the part of human rights groups toward all Azerbaijani cases, I came to the realization that I must take up the cause. Straightaway I could see the effects of repression and forced assimilation that the Azerbaijanis were subjected to in the course of the last century. I and others who have spoken about Azerbaijani rights have been regularly denounced as traitors and separatists and have faced insults and threats, not only by members of dominant Persian groups but also by some assimilated Persianized members of the minority communities.

Since the May 2006 uprising in the Azerbaijani region of Iran, Azerbaijani activists have been hit hard. Many are in prison, some are missing, and as I mentioned before, some were killed. Those of us fortunate enough to live in societies where we are entitled to full political rights can reach out to help the less fortunate. We are asking the international community to be aware of the situation in Iran and to take action on behalf of those who have no voice.

When I ask activists or family members who have lost a loved one or have someone in prison if they have a message, they ask me to speak about their struggle for freedom of expression, democracy, and human rights. But for them as Azerbaijanis, their struggle is also about eliminating racial discrimination and having the right to their own language and culture. Their message can be summarized in these words by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the imprisoned Burmese leader: "Please use your liberty to promote ours".

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much as well. That was very concise.

Apparently the interpreter is on the way. It is my understanding, Mr. Batebi, that you are comfortable giving your presentation, but that the translator would be helpful for any questions you might receive. Is that correct?

• (1245)

**Mr. Ahmad Batebi (Spokesperson, Human Rights Activists in Iran):** [Witness speaks in Persian]

**Mrs. Fakhteh Zamani:** [Witness speaks in Persian]

I am going to translate for him. He will try to give a very short presentation and he will concentrate on statistics, so I'll translate for him to the best of my ability as I mentioned. Persian is my second language.

**The Chair:** Please. Thank you.

**Mr. Ahmad Batebi (Interpretation):** On behalf of myself and other human rights activists from within Iran, I would like to thank the committee and the Canadian government for paying attention to human rights issues in Iran without considering the political effects of this issue.

The violation of human rights in Iran is systematically done by the government. The problem is not only the violation of human rights, but the laws that support the violation are also a huge problem. Since the Iranian judicial system uses sharia laws and Islamic rules, the violation of human rights is embedded within the law and within the constitution.

I will provide a presentation based on the statistics I have from last year's violations. All this is in the area of freedom of expression. With the closing of the opposition newspapers, Iran had the highest rate in the past year. Millions of websites—

**Mrs. Fakhteh Zamani:** I am rescued.

• (1250)

**Mr. Qumars Shahparaki (Interpreter/As an individual):** They gave me the wrong room number.

**The Chair:** Well, what I'm going to suggest is that if you're ready to go we can recommence.

Please continue.

**Mr. Ahmad Batebi (Interpretation):** This report that I'm presenting here is not a complete report because we don't have enough observers to inform us about the situation in different cases. And these are only those that we have already investigated and realized are true. Even this limited information that is available to us may give you a picture about the number of violations of human rights that have happened in Iran. Iran has a high level in that respect.

Unfortunately I didn't have enough time to prepare a comprehensive report, because I was informed only three days ago that I would be able to present this case. It is therefore limited. But I tried to put that in statistical tables so that the matter will be very clear.

The first part of the report talks about media, mostly publications. There are many journalists and reporters who have lost their jobs and were forced out of Iran.

There are always reports from the national security centre—which is at the highest level with respect to security issues—so that all the news will not be passed to the public, like issues related to the violation of human rights or nuclear energy. Other people have shown their interest with respect to nuclear energy, but they said the matter should be mostly focused on economic issues rather than the nuclear issue.

Now I have statistics to give you. First, let's talk about closing down the newspapers. In the last year, there were 29 cases. There were 16 cases of the firing of reporters, 26 cases of reporters who have been tried, 73 cases of reporters who were called to court or summoned, 21 cases of journalists who were tried and found guilty, and 17 cases of arrests of journalists and reporters.

Now let's go to another subject, which is students. There was a high number of arrests of students, mostly activists. I use one case, which was very famous, as an example. In one of the large universities, one of the executives of the university sexually harassed a girl. Before the final conclusion of that assault, a student opened the gate, opened the room, went inside, and didn't let him do as much as he wanted. They had a film from the situation, but nobody permitted them to show that film. The result was that the man who did the assault got a better job. The students who were involved in opening the issue were forced to get out of the university.

I have more than 10 other cases that I can give you.

Now, we are still talking about the students. The number of cases in which they have been called to court or summoned was 139. The number of those who received bail was 66; tried and condemned, 77; deprived from education, 234. There have been 215 arrests. For closing down student newspapers, the number is 64. The... [Inaudible—Editor]...committee expelled is 13, but the count for the security committee is 563.

•(1255)

In the case of freedom for women, I have another section. There is discrimination against them. Tens of thousands of things have happened. The main issue is that they are forced to cover themselves in the way that the government wants them to be covered. We don't have any exact information regarding these issues. I therefore don't have the statistics for that. In most cases, they will be sent to prison and kept for a short time.

For all the women activists who have been active on different social issues and non-governmental organizations of women who are very active in respect to equality and freedom, there are organizations. Among the leaders of these groups, 25 of them have been called or summoned, 40 of them have been tried and found guilty, and 40 people have been arrested, sent to court, and now have court cases.

Let's now go to labour. Due to the economic crisis, many labourers in Iran have lost their jobs. Unfortunately, due to the limitation of time, I don't want to go into the details, but I'd like to give you the statistics in that regard. More than 11,000 people have been fired. There are 26 cases of heads of unions who have been tried and condemned, 38 have been called to court or summoned and have had court cases, and 84 people have been arrested for a short time.

Let's now go to religious minorities. In this case, this is unfortunately the lowest because there is so much discrimination against them. They are mostly Bahá'ís and Christians. Let me again go to statistics rather than descriptions.

Among the Bahá'ís, 42 people have been arrested in the past year. There have been 31 cases of attacks and assaults to their homes. Twenty-five Bahá'í families have been summoned and called to court, and 11 cases have had a verdict of execution.

•(1300)

Fifty-one Christians have been arrested.

Among the Muslims, there are, as you know, two major groups: Sunnis and Shiites. One hundred and thirty-nine Sunnis have been arrested.

The other case is about the *darvesh*. I don't know whether you are familiar with this or not. *Darvesh* refers to the Sufis. One hundred and three Sufis have been arrested, and 19 of them have been tried and have received an execution verdict.

In the last part, I'd like to say a few words about execution and capital punishment in Iran. Amnesty International has mentioned 346 cases of execution, but our number is a little bit lower than that. Based on our investigation, we have 278 cases. There are 30 cases of execution for people under 18 years. There are eight cases of people who are in prison waiting for execution. Obviously the number might be greater than this, but this is what we could investigate, and my presentation is based on that.

I appreciate that you have listened to my argument, and if you want something in writing, I can provide it to you.

•(1305)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much to both our witnesses.

We have sufficient time to do two rounds of questions, which is not always possible in this committee. What I'm going to suggest we do is start with our normal seven-minute rounds. We can be a little bit flexible if need be because of translation issues. Then hopefully we'll be able to have seven-minute questions in the second round as well, allowing everybody to get full time with our witnesses.

We traditionally begin with the Liberals. Mr. Silva, please.

**Mr. Mario Silva:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me begin by thanking both our witnesses for their excellent presentation. We on this committee for human rights are very much concerned about the situation that's taking place in Iran.

Before I ask the question, I would like to make a few remarks. We have heard over and over again, both from different human rights organizations and from people in the diasporas of Iran, who have complained about the enormous human rights atrocities, such as arresting and detaining journalists, union activists, and students; depriving people of their language and their education; and persecuting religious minorities from the Bahá'í or Christian faiths. We have also heard over and over again the rhetoric and seen the actions of a very genocidal government that wants to destroy the Jewish people throughout the world and the state of Israel. These are alarming concerns to us here in Canada, which require the international community to focus its attention on what to do about the situation in Iran.

We also know about the persecution of linguistic minorities. We talked about the Azerbaijani community that came forward, and we're very much concerned about them. We also know that the Balochi community as well has been persecuted, not just in Iran but also in Pakistan. I know the Balochi community in Pakistan is also under persecution and also does not have access to their linguistic rights and cultural rights that should be accorded to all people.

We are very concerned, and we very much would like to ask the questions arising from this testimony on the various cases of arrest and detention of union leaders and journalists. We had, of course, our own Canadian journalist who was murdered in Iran. Minors have been executed for reasons including their sexual orientation. Two young people were executed in Iran. We also know that gays and lesbians are persecuted on a regular basis in Iran.

Given that, I want to hear what both of you think are some concrete things we as a committee could do to advance these human rights issues so that we can in fact get the international audience to listen about the atrocities that are taking place in that country. We need to have a clear focus and perspective that we as a community are not just closing our eyes. We see that there are gross violations of human rights, and we have to act, but we also need your support, and we thank you very much for the work you are already doing on human rights.

Mr. Chair, to speed things up, maybe we can hear from Fakhteh first, and then while the translator speaks to Ahmad, he could answer the second part, if that makes it easier.

• (1310)

**Mrs. Fakhteh Zamani:** Yes, thank you very much. Having this hearing is a first step toward bringing attention to the issues of minorities, especially ethnic minorities, whom I try to concentrate on.

You mentioned that this was already a positive step forward. In addition to that, we would like to have more chances to bring the issues of minorities to the attention of other members of Parliament. As you might have known, ethnic minorities especially are totally dismissed, as I mentioned in my speech, because they are a very sensitive issue both to the government and the opposition groups outside the country. As I testified to the U.S. Congress, I was not attacked by members of the Iranian government but by members of the opposition groups outside Iran, whom the police were called to remove.

You mentioned the Balochi cases. I tried to work with a couple of Balochi cases after hearing very alarming reports from Balochi human rights groups. One human rights activist was executed last year, and his brother was sentenced to five years' of imprisonment. I've been invited to go to the European Parliament to speak about the Balochi community. They have invited me to talk generally about everybody's cases, but unfortunately, because of lack of resources, we focus on the Azerbaijanis.

What I have heard from Balochis is that there is a special judge appointed by the government to try these cases. Confessions have been obtained under severe torture, and these people are tried in 10 to 15 minutes in their cells, without a prosecutor or a defence lawyer present. Just because of the special Balochi situation, a judge shows up and asks a few questions of this tortured individual and sentences them to death. There are hundreds of Balochis on death row.

Unfortunately, as I mentioned before, because of almost a century of discrimination, ethnic minorities are not able to organize within the country, and they also have a hard time getting resources outside the country.

I have heard hundreds of cases of Balochis that are not known to the international community. The human rights groups in Tehran bring cases from the central areas to international attention, which is wonderful, but unfortunately we don't hear that much about ethnic groups like Balochis and Azerbaijanis.

Our first goal is to bring awareness. That is because at this point we feel there is not enough awareness. The more meetings and hearings we can have that go toward achieving a resolution, the better the chances for ethnic minorities.

• (1315)

**The Chair:** Mr. Batebi, did you have a response as well?

**Mr. Ahmad Batebi (Interpretation):** First, I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity.

Second, I would like to say that any activity with respect to human rights will have an effect on the situation in Iran. Iran usually reacts to any action outside Iran with respect to human rights issues. While I was in prison, I noticed this fact, that whenever there was action by some groups outside Iran with respect to human rights, then the pressure toward me by the guards in the prison was much less through the duration of this external action.

There are three issues I would like to mention that I believe may have an influence on the situation in Iran. One is the international conferences with respect to international human rights and the invitation of people from Iran so they can express their views. That will have a major effect. Also, the other thing is the expression of concern by committees to the United Nations in respect of issues of human rights violations. Also, of course, somehow provide support to those Iranians who are activists on social or other issues in respect of human rights.

I am very thankful.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** You have the floor, Mr. Bigras.

**Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, BQ):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

First of all, welcome to the subcommittee. Your presence here is special, particularly considering that the Iranian Constitution supposedly guarantees certain rights, notably language and cultural rights. Not only are you waging your own battle, you are also fighting on behalf of all minorities, whether it be for the Kurds, the Balouches or the Arabs. Your battle is a battle waged by all ethnic minorities that believe basic rights such as the right to one's own culture, education and language must be upheld.

You used the word “assimilation” in your presentation, but so far, I haven't heard you use the word “genocide”. Yet, some claim that there have been signs of this in some provinces. I read the following headline somewhere: “Genocide of Azerbaijanis in Khodjali”.

In your opinion, would you qualify what is happening today in certain provinces as a genocide?

• (1320)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Madam Zamani, please.

**Mrs. Fakhteh Zamani:** Can you repeat the name?

**Mr. Bernard Bigras:** Khojaly.

**Mrs. Fakhteh Zamani:** Khojaly, yes.

There is the Republic of Azerbaijan, with eight million Azerbaijanis living there. It's to the north of Iran. I have handed out a map. But the majority of other Azerbaijanis live within Iran. The Khojaly genocide you mentioned happened in Karabakh, in the country of Azerbaijan.

On cultural genocide, yes, you are right. What has happened in Iran is cultural genocide.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Bernard Bigras:** What can you tell us about the International Moral Court? I believe it was created in 2002. Commonly called the Paris Tribunal, the Court was the product of the Committee to Pursue the International Crimes of the Islamic Republic. In your opinion, has this tribunal produced some positive results to date?

[*English*]

**Mrs. Fakhteh Zamani:** My constitution is on the human rights issues within Iran. I have heard about Khojaly. It's an issue outside Iran, and this conflict between Armenians and Azerbaijanis is happening in the country of Azerbaijan.

This brings me back to our main issue. There's still confusion between the Azerbaijani country and Iranian Azerbaijanis. What you are mentioning happened in the Karabakh, which is a region in the country of Azerbaijan.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Bernard Bigras:** Unless I'm mistaken, the International Moral Tribunal is investigating the Iranian regime. Correct?

[*English*]

**Mrs. Fakhteh Zamani:** Yes, that's correct. That's not in Iran, but there's a tribunal going on about the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Bernard Bigras:** More specifically, what measures are you expecting to see? Amnesty International issues reports on its efforts, but what concrete steps do you expect Canada to take to address the problems that you have outlined to us today? Are there any concrete measures that you would like to propose to us?

[*English*]

**Mrs. Fakhteh Zamani:** Every year I go through a round of meetings mentioning the annual resolution that was passed in the UN against Iran on the subject of human rights issues in Iran. Ethnic minorities were mentioned, but not extensively. One of our requests is to have ethnic groups be a very clear part of that resolution. Every year annual reports come from every country, and ethnic minorities are not mentioned. We would welcome a very clear resolution on ethnic minorities—it's possible—but as you can see, we have a long way to go. We would like to focus on awareness and the cultural genocide—a linguistic genocide that has been happening in Iran for the last 80 years. Ethnic minorities need international support to bring awareness to this issue, and we call on the different governments and the Canadian government to support us.

My organization is a Canadian-based organization that has been working tirelessly on this for three years, but we have very limited resources. We ask the Canadian government for resources to be able to do more. A resolution or any other help to bring awareness in Canada and the international community would be welcome.

I am going to attend the Durbin conference on racism. What is happening in Iran is a very severe type of racism and systematic assimilation. But unfortunately the international community is not aware of it, and this is the first time in the last couple of years that a few issues have come up.

• (1325)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Bernard Bigras:** Do you think the matter should be brought to the attention of an international tribunal?

[*English*]

**Mrs. Fakhteh Zamani:** That would be fantastic. At this point that would be welcomed by ethnic minorities in Iran as well as Azerbaijanis. From 1945 there was genocide in Azerbaijan after the autonomous region was attacked by the Pahlavi regime, and thousands of people were killed.

Banning of the language in the region is cultural genocide. If this could go to the tribunal, it would be our dream come true. But at this point, what I am trying to say is that when I go to the UN I am still mistaken as an Azerbaijani from Azerbaijan. People in the world still don't know that there are millions of Azerbaijanis living in Iran. At the United Nations we would like to have a chance to speak.

I have spoken to the Canadian mission at the UN. I thanked them because they were the initiators of some of the meetings I have had in foreign affairs. I'm going back to Geneva to the UN and they have been a support, at least in the case of the connections to make this issue known. For our organization and the ethnic groups within Iran, any help from the Canadian government to bring this to their attention would be very welcome.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We started to run a little over our time on the last two rounds of questions, so I'm going to go directly to Mr. Marston, and then we can see whether we need to have interventions for both witnesses.

We'll go to Mr. Marston, please.

**Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank each of you for being here. And the interpreter's late arrival is no problem at all.

I am, and I guess we all are, troubled by what we're hearing. Much of this is not new news. We've had previous witnesses talk about similar situations. Racism—and that's what we're talking about here—is something totalitarian regimes often use to keep control, especially if they're in a minority situation themselves. It appears that in Iran they've used racism to fragment that society and keep it contained.

I'm sorry if I'm going too quickly.

**Mr. Qumars Shahparaki:** No, that's all right.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** Okay.

We also understand from previous witnesses that about 30% of the country's population controls the other 70%. I asked a previous witness about the impact of the Internet in raising dissent, because it's being shut down, and the newspapers and journalists and that, and that person seemed to think that it was working fairly well.

I'm pleased to hear that you're going to Geneva to the Human Rights Council. Have you noted any impact from the United Nations, any pronouncements at all that have had any impact on Iran?

**Mrs. Fakhteh Zamani:** As I mentioned, I started not even three years ago. It was more than two and a half years ago.

At the United Nations we have had support, in individual cases, from a special procedure group in OHCHR, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. They have been very supportive in individual cases we have submitted to them of human rights violations against ethnic minorities. But we have not had access to the rest of the UN, because of the limited resources we have—my organization, other ethnic minority groups, and human rights activists. It's a huge issue for a few people or one or two organizations to tackle.

In a general sense, I attended a minority forum and I had time to address the forum. Other than that, we have not had a chance. We are working on it. I am going to a German conference to raise the issue of racism, but other than that, we have not.

Actually, I had plans to go back and speak to the Canadian mission, to Joe Hinton and others in the mission, to see if they would support us in getting a seat so we would have the right to speak at the General Assembly and at other events. We could bring more attention if the Canadian government would be willing to support us and also guide us. We are limited in resources, with the minimum resources to tackle the issue. First bring awareness in the international community, then see where we go from there.

• (1330)

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** Thank you.

Mr. Batebi, something I think should be made known to people at home who have taken the time to watch is that as a student activist, you found yourself in prison for nine years. I just wanted to acknowledge the courage it takes to continue dissent after that time.

We often sit here in this committee and we hear the words “torture” and “mistreatment” being used. What life is like in a prison is talked about in very general terms. I don't want to invade your personal privacy, but would you tell us a little bit about what it is like in an Iranian prison day to day? It appears to me that torture and execution is systemic in this country.

Could you comment? And if you prefer not to, that's fine as well.

**Mr. Ahmad Batebi (Interpretation):** As you mentioned, it is systemic and designed, engineered, to be that way. The government has three goals.

First, they would like to get information on the future plans of various activist groups. These might be students, workers, labourers, or members of other associations.

The second act is torture. It is necessary to apply pressure so that they come to a point where they are not willing to continue these activities. This is for the rest of the people, so that they will be informed about what would happen to them if they were involved in that kind of activity. This happened while I was in prison, and I have to say that it is still happening now.

If you are interested, I might be able to give you some documentation regarding this issue. But this torture that I suffered is something I can tell you about.

I was kept for 17 months in a small room by myself, and that room was no more than a washroom. This situation caused health problems. They took me twice for execution. In one case, I was taken for execution with a group of others. Of course, I was not executed. I was in the middle, with one man on the left and another on the right. They blindfolded us and forced us to stand on top of a chair, as if to hang us. They pulled my blindfold aside a bit so I could see what was happening to the other two. These were people who were imprisoned next to me in small cells. I saw their execution.

Once, for 72 hours they didn't let me sleep. They cut me and put salt in my wounds. If you're interested, I can show it to you. If you want details, please let me know.



•(1335)

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** My reason for asking the question is that the “Hollywoodization” of torture has predisposed some of us to a certain view of what it’s like. It can be of a far more psychological nature. That was the point I hoped would come out. I want to thank you for sharing this.

**Mr. Ahmad Batebi (Interpretation):** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Mr. Sweet.

**Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My colleague was going to a place very similar to where I was going in the sense of speaking to my colleague beside me and just mentioning the extraordinary indomitable spirit that our two witnesses have and, of course, those like them in Iran who consistently put up with the treatment that they do. We commend you highly for being before us today and for continuing to take risks in order that other people might be free.

Mr. Chair, I’ve been to Yad Vashem, Israel, and there is a chronology of the Holocaust. What really concerns me with the testimony today and the previous testimony is that all of the elements that were precursors, harbingers, of the Holocaust are at play in Iran today: the arrest of individuals with trumped-up charges, the elimination of freedom of the press, and then of course very disturbing is the demonization of particular cultures through the press, which is controlled by the state. I just see that ever-increasing with every witness we hear.

Although I only have a limited amount of time, I want to put a question to you specifically, Ms. Zamani, because there’s one issue that I was not familiar with. You said that in your quest for defending human rights you actually were attacked by some opposition groups. Can you educate us a bit on that dynamic, which is just one more challenge in trying to get the word out?

•(1340)

**Mrs. Fakhteh Zamani:** Yes, and that’s not the only case. Whenever I speak, I am nervous. Sometimes I look at the audience....

It’s not just me. If you speak to anyone who tries to bring up the issues of ethnic minorities, they will tell you that opposition groups outside are sometimes much harsher. In my meetings, I always mention that. Sometimes I say that I don’t know which one is worse, the Iranian government or opposition outside.

That is very hard for some people to hear, especially in the United States, where they think these people are human rights activists or democracy promoters. But some people attacked me in the U.S. Congress. One was the director of a democracy group. It was an eye-opener. I was trying to explain, in my meetings with U.S. Congress members, that we didn’t know which one was worse. Only when they saw it could they believe how harsh people could be.

The previous government identified Persians as Aryans. Azerbaijani Turks and Semites are not, obviously, Aryans. The same thoughts carried on after the fall of the Pahlavi regime. Outside, we are considered foreigners. We are considered invaders. We are considered as not Iranian. If we do not assimilate and become

Persian, or Persianized, we are basically marginalized. But after we become Persian, we are part of society and we have access to power.

In Iran, even though this government is now called an Islamic government and they are not supposed to look at the racial aspect—their priority is implementing laws of Islam—it’s very ironic that the same thought form carries and the same racism goes on. Recently, for example, in the money they’ve printed, one of bills says that the Prophet has said that Persians will reach the highest glory of such-and-such, while the others are just basically again marginalized.

The state-run newspapers censor everything. Everything is checked thoroughly. Yet somehow they printed a cartoon of an Azerbaijani cockroach not understanding Persian. On top of that, they showed ten ways to exterminate cockroaches. It was a very insulting and very disturbing playing out of how cockroaches can be exterminated.

Also, it is very disturbing to say this, but now, even outside, jokes about Azerbaijanis being donkeys are very common. I don’t take those jokes in Canada. Sometimes I am asked by some Iranians why I am not cool, why I.... But I’m trying to say to people that racism has been embedded into society, and it is unfortunate. Minorities are attacked, but the whole bed of society has a social disease that has not been addressed. And still, to many, it doesn’t even exist.

•(1345)

That is what we are dealing with outside. I have been in Canada for 12 years, so I consider myself Canadian. I am safe here, and everything is good for me. But after starting this work, I can see what is the challenge. I think many members of my community are paralyzed. When they are attacked by these groups, they are paralyzed. I don’t understand, because I have been taught here to stand for my rights as an immigrant.

I am accepted. I am part of this society. But where I was born, if keep my identity as Azerbaijani Turkic, or if I ask for my language rights, or if I ask for equal rights like the others have, like the Persians have.... I have nothing against them. There are many wonderful ethnic groups, ethnic Persians, but unfortunately, we are not tolerated. That is the biggest challenge we have. And now I see why my community is very afraid to address these issues.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Thank you.

How is my time, Mr. Chairman?

**The Chair:** You’re 20 seconds over your time.

**Mr. David Sweet:** If I could just finally ask our kind clerk to follow up with Ms. Zamani, I would like to have a list of those opposition groups that are obstructing getting the news out, because that should be part of our examination as well. If there is going to be another impediment, then we should identify that very clearly in our future report.

**The Chair:** All right. Thanks very much.

Mr. Cotler, you’re next.

**Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to ask Mr. Batebi a question. It’ll be the same one for Ms. Zamani. If I have a chance, I’ll put a second question.

Mr. Batebi, 10 years ago in 1999, when you were then a leader of the student movement, your picture appeared on the front page of *The Economist*. At the time, you were holding up the blood-stained shirt of a fellow protester. It became a kind of iconic photo, which went around the world, as to the plight of students in Iran and, really, the human rights situation in Iran. You were then sentenced to death. You were nine years in prison. Fortunately, you escaped and achieved refugee status in the United States a little less than a year ago.

Here's my question. From the perspective now, looking at the situation then, to the extent that you can appreciate it, is the situation getting worse with regard to human rights in Iran or not, and not only with regard to students, but what are the trends? Are things getting worse? If so, are any groups in particular being targeted and it is getting worse for them? That's my question.

Ms. Zamani, you mentioned the uprising three years ago, but again, you've been away for 12 years now. As best as you can appreciate it, is the situation regarding human rights in Iran getting worse? If so, why?

We'll start with Mr. Batebi.

**Mr. Ahmad Batebi (Interpretation):** First, I would like to thank you for the question.

I can assure you that the situation is getting worse. I am sure Ms. Zamani is going to certify that by saying the same thing.

The first reason for this is that 10 years ago the situation for the government was different, because Mr. Khatami was President and was a reformer. Although during his presidency they had not done much, at least the talk was there. Although the verdict then was execution for me, because of him and because of the situation I was not executed. If it were now, for sure I would have been executed.

I can give you statistics and numbers related to labour activities and to students and other social groups who have been involved in different activities regarding freedom. You will realize that the numbers then were better than the numbers now. Societies are supposed to improve themselves. We don't see such a thing.

In order to explain this matter, I need two minutes to define what I want to say. I am sorry that I have to take that much time, but I think that is necessary to say this.

• (1350)

Iran is the only country among the Muslim countries that is Shi'ah in the administration and in the total population. Therefore, their definition of Islam is a different definition from that in the rest of the world.

In this division of the faith, the philosophy is that the leaders of the Shi'ah section, at the end, one day, were supposed to wait for the Promised One who is going to come and correct everything. Therefore, those who are the leaders of their religion were supposed to create the atmosphere so that the Promised One would come. In order to have final justice, the situation should become so bad that the necessity of the Promised One would be justified. And this is one section of the people who are believers of this faith. The other group believes you're supposed to do nothing and wait for the day the Promised One is going to come.

The President at this time, Mr. Ahmadinejad, is under the influence of the first group I mentioned. Therefore they are not afraid of violations of human rights, violations of freedoms.

You may have doubts about what I said because it doesn't make sense, but if you do a little bit more investigation about the clergypersons in Iran, you will find that the group called Hojjatieh are the followers of this mentality.

For me, this approach is a sort of anarchy. As you have seen in the past, the action of President Ahmadinejad is to deny the Holocaust or have a lack of respect for freedom or for women in Iran. It is in that direction. This is based on the philosophy of disturbing the situation, creating a mass, so that the situation will be ready for the Promised One to come.

• (1355)

The other thing of course is the different approach that they take on a daily basis of laws and regulations of the judiciary in Iran, based on that. Therefore, their hands these clergy people are completely open to do their own interpretation of anything. If a clergyman is in power, that clergyman could do the interpretation in the way he wishes, even for their personal interests.

It may be ironic to realize that even some of the clergy people who do not belong to that group may do a different interpretation of the religion, as some well-known clergy people in Iran have said that the Bahá'ís should be considered citizens like the rest.

In this situation, a few groups have been harassed more than others. First, there are the Bahá'ís and Christians in Iran, and especially those Christians who were previously Muslims and who switched to Christianity. The other group is those who are not thinking in line with the administration, like those who have done a good education outside or writers. And the third group, which is a major group, are the women in Iran. They have been harassed, and their activities in respect to social issues or others have been denied.

First, I would like to apologize for the examples that I am going to make. This is in respect to women's issues in Iran. Especially accept my apology towards the ladies in that issue.

In Iran, based on the faith, if someone kills a man, he has to pay some amount of money for the killing of that person. It is the same for women. And of course if you lose part of your body, then you have to pay a different rate for that crime. For different crimes, you have to pay different rates.

• (1400)

I'm sorry for expressing myself in this way, but I have to.

The amount paid for killing a woman is not exactly the same as the amount paid for killing a man. Therefore, if someone kills a woman, the amount that has to be paid for the crime is equal to the amount that has to be paid if a person puts a man in the position of losing his manhood. If a man therefore loses his manhood and is unable to be sexually active, it is the same amount that is paid for the life of a woman. I hope this is clear. If women tried to change this kind of law, they would be in trouble and could go to jail.

I don't have anything more to say. Thank you so much.

**The Chair:** Thank you. We did allow you to go on considerably longer because it was obviously of keen interest to everybody.

I see that the clock is showing seven minutes before 2 p.m., which gives Mr. Hiebert time to ask his questions.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I won't need seven minutes, but I want to ask a couple of questions.

Thank you again for being here. Are you concerned that by testifying here today, you, your friends, or your family are being put at risk?

**Mr. Ahmad Batebi (Interpretation):** Unfortunately, I am, and I am worried about that. My family is also exposed to such a problem. They have already mentioned to me that this is the price we have to pay for freedom.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Are they in Iran?

**Mr. Ahmad Batebi (Interpretation):** I am the only one outside Iran. My whole family lives there.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Ms. Zamani.

**Mrs. Fakhteh Zamani:** Yes, I am afraid for my safety and for my siblings. There is not enough time to elaborate on that. Most of my siblings are fortunately here in Canada. My parents are back home, and they are constantly taken in for questioning. A couple of times, even when my father's friends were in the ministry of intelligence, other activists were also there for questioning. They came and reported to me. Sometimes they were afraid to tell me. Not for political reasons, but because my father was a landowner after the Islamic revolution, he was almost executed for inheriting land.

I'm going to combine an answer to both questions.

He was hiding in Kordestan at the beginning of the revolution. It was at a time when Sejan was controlled by Kurdish rebels. We were fortunate that he was not captured immediately after the revolution. He would definitely have been killed. But everything we had was confiscated—everything, including toys that I had.

I have been in Canada for almost 20 years. It is something I left behind, but I am again dealing with the Iranian government. My husband was also in prison as a teenager for having some books. He was tortured. This work is one of the reasons that I have started again. He is one of the reasons.

Since childhood I have experienced terror by this government. My father has also experienced it, with the previous government, by asking for language rights. So it's something that I have been dealing with since a very young age.

When they took my father for questioning, he said to them, "You have taken everything I have. You almost executed me. I have served a prison term for inheriting land. What else can you do?" At his age, he is now a senior. They have threatened him. Even the telephone conversations that we have are always monitored.

But we have to do the right thing. That is what I have been taught, and that is what I am doing.

• (1405)

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** We don't have a lot of time.

We've been listening to a number of witnesses, and I got the sense that some minorities within Iran were protected under the constitution and others were not. But I hear you saying that, despite that protection, it doesn't really exist in reality. Is that correct?

**Mrs. Fakhteh Zamani:** That's correct. Actually, for most of these Azerbaijani activists, even asking for the implementation of the constitution has got them arrested, detained, tortured, kidnapped, and killed. Azerbaijani activists are operating within very unfair laws of the Iranian government. Their movement is totally peaceful, and they are not violent.

The first thing they ask for is implementation of the constitution. Not only is the constitution not implemented, but asking for implementation can get you to prison, as in the case of Abbas Lisani. He has served months for asking for implementation of articles 15 and 19 of the Iranian constitution.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Heibert.

Thank you to our witnesses. Our time has expired, so let me simply thank both of our witnesses for coming and going to considerable trouble. And I'll also thank our translator for being here.

Thank you all.

**Mrs. Fakhteh Zamani:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** The meeting is adjourned

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