

Irandoost, A., Martin, W.K. and Gillespie, G. (2010) 'Iranian Refugees - A Human Rights Disaster', *Right Side News*, 14th July [Online]. Available at: <http://www.rightsidenews.com/>

According to UNHCR, Iranian refugees comprise 19% of the total registered refugee population in Turkey. Since the Islamic Revolution[i] in 1979, the passage of Penal Law in 2008 authorizing death penalty for apostasy and especially after June 2009 fraudulent election[ii], Iranians have been seeking refuge in foreign countries in large numbers.

UNHCR Global Trends Report paints a dire picture for the year 2010. The number of refugees and asylum seekers worldwide has risen to over 43 million. In Turkey, UNHCR lists a total 10,350 refugees and 5,987 asylum seekers for 2009. It is expected that the number of registered Iranian refugees will more than double between 2010 to 2011 from 2,230 to 5,550 respectively. It is estimated that there are as many unregistered Iranian refugees as well.

Iranian refugees have often escaped a violence and persecution. They have lost everything, their homes and families. They have no chance to work or send their children to school or live a meaningful life. They yearn to live in peace, yet only a small number of refugees obtain refugee status; others are living in desperate conditions waiting for the UNCHR to process their cases.

Documents have surfaced that clearly show Mr. Khamenei gave direct orders to deal harshly with demonstrators. They were shot at, arrested, tortured, raped and executed. Many have fled Iran in fear of arrest, imprisonment and execution since the regime has labeled them as traitors, working with foreign governments, to overthrow the regime.

After June 12, 2009 election, the regime launched a series of operations to identify and track down those who participated in demonstrations. Worried that stories of torture, rape and harassment might reach a wider audience, the regime has positioned thousands of plain-clothed intelligence officers throughout Turkey and neighboring countries to actively track, attack and intimidate Iranian refugees. Those who manage to avoid detection live in destitution, fearful and in miserable conditions.

Turkey has emerged as the main country for asylum seekers, since it does not require visas from Iranian citizens[iii]. Arriving in Turkey, Iranians file their asylum petitions directly with the Turkish authorities, or sign up through the UNHCR. Since Iranian asylum-seekers cannot earn refugee status in Turkey due to the 1951 Geneva Convention[iv] on the Status of Refugees, they are resettled in other countries.

For a variety of reasons, it takes UNHCR between one to three years to process refugee applications but for some refugees the waiting period is much longer. While in Turkey where job opportunities are rare and financial resources are limited, refugees usually encounter public hostility. Many refugees who suffer from torture and gun shots wounds find it extremely difficult to gain access to medical treatment. The situation is more acute for children of refugees (they are not allowed to enroll in school), homosexuals (they are perceived to be moral degenerates), and apostates (they have committed a grave sin by leaving Islam). Additionally, Turkish laws require that all refugees to pay a \$227 "stay" fee (ikamat) every six months, plus a \$93 document processing and guidebook fee.

Many asylum seekers whose petitions are declined or those who are caught before they file a petition and cannot meet the legal requirements for staying in Turkey are sent back to Iran.

It is estimated that between 1993 and 1998, more than 2,000 Iranian asylum seekers were sent back, many of them were arrested, tortured, sentenced or executed in Iran. Reliable statistics are not readily available for those who are arrested and sent back since June elections, but indications are that the numbers are significant.

Ms. Maryam Sabri [v] who claims she was raped by Iranian authorities while in detention, was attacked in Kayseri, Turkey two days after she repeated rape allegations in an interview with the BBC. She believes the attack was carried out by Iranian authorities to intimidate her into silence. Some refugees believe the Iranian authorities have put them under surveillance in an effort to silence them about rape and torture allegations. Some say their families in Iran have also been targeted. Still, UNHCR and law enforcement authorities continue to claim that Iranians refugees are protected and safe.

Iranian refugees in other neighboring countries face similar desperate conditions in the absence of adequate protection and unexplained delays by the UNHCR in processing their cases. Officials at the UNHCR require applicants to "prove endangerment of life" as a condition for obtaining refugee status. But many refugees are not able to provide such documentation since they had to flee Iran often in a hurry to avoid arrest by regime Basij force and secret service. Often the regime has confiscated these documents, or they have been lost or stolen during the perilous journey from Iran to Turkey or elsewhere.

Iranians are considered some of most pro west population in the Middle East. Much to the Islamic Republic's dismay, ordinary Iranians were the first to hold candle light vigils to mourn the loss of life in the United States after hijackers crashed airlines into the World Trade Center, while in contrast Palestinians celebrated and danced in the streets.

But for some unexplained reason, the world does not seem to condemn blatant human rights violations committed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. When the UN elected Iran to the Commission on Women's Rights, not a single word was heard from our Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, or the US Ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice. When pictures and videos of brutal crackdown, torture and killings of young demonstrators were all over the Internet, the news media remained largely silent. To this day, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon has refused to strongly condemn the Iranian Regime's blatant violation of just about every article in the UN Convention of Human Rights, despite being a member nation and signatory to it. Ironically, when nine knife-carrying supposedly Palestinian human rights activists were killed by Israeli police, it sparked an international outcry and condemnation. Such duplicity is inexcusable and unconscionable and sends the message that Palestinian lives are valued more than those of Iranians or Israelis.

Perhaps Iranians are resented for a group of extremists having taken over the US embassy in Iran and taking Americans hostage for 444 days in 1979. They might mistakenly believe that because the media fills TV screens with pictures of anti American demonstrators shouting death to America and burning the American flag, these are representative of Iranians. Yet, the fact remains that Iran is a country of 75 million people, and all hate rallies are orchestrated by the Iranian Regime who force government employees and paid Basijis to attend.

Meanwhile, in Turkey and other receiving countries, callous disregard of their basic human rights causes refugees to lose their dignity. People around the world should demand that refugees be treated with dignity and respect. World communities and their Governments can no longer afford to remain indifferent while this tragedy is unfolding. They must:

Expel the Iranian Regime from the UN - Regardless of UNHRC and Turkish authorities disputing the veracity and accuracy of refugees' claims, worldwide organizations like the UN and international Governments have a moral imperative to demand accountability from the regime for their human rights abuses. The first step has to be to expel this rogue Iranian Regime and known state sponsor of terrorism from the UN.

Bring the Iranian Regime Criminals to Justice - IRI lobbyists are given free access to the world media to sugarcoat the Islamic Republic's medieval practices of stoning and hanging men, women and children. This regime has been getting away with murder, rape and torture since they came into power in 1979. Afraid of criticizing the regime for its violations because of their lucrative contracts with it, world leaders have acted irresponsibly and have been unwilling to utilize international criminal laws to bring them to justice. They must now do this.

Involvement of Faith-based Organization is crucial - Religious organizations and leaders must bear some of the responsibility for what has been happening in Iran. Taking advantage of the regime's atrocities, they have been actively engaged in converting young and disillusioned Iranians to Christianity, fully aware of dangers that lie ahead for such apostates since the passage of the Penal Law in 2008, which began to authorize the death penalty for apostasy (conversion from Islam to Christianity). These converts have been harassed, kidnapped, raped and stabbed to death by the Iranian Regime, yet Christian communities continue to remain silent and have failed to provide adequate guidance and protection for their converts. It is now time for them to speak out and provide support.

Israel should do more - Israel has the most to gain from an Iranian regime change. Iranians and Israelis have common historical and cultural ties reaching back 2,500 years. Unfortunately, Israel has lost a golden opportunity to offer aid to Iranian opposition and refugees wishing to seek asylum in Israel. For the past 31 years, the Iranian Regime has brainwashed young Iranians against Israel. Instead, positive relationships between Iranians and Israelis need to be cultivated during times of crisis. For cultural and humanitarian reasons, it would greatly benefit all parties involved if Iranian asylum seekers were allowed to settle in Israel.

World Communities and their Government need to assist - As the UNHCR is incapable of properly handling the influx of Iranian refugees, more active participation and support from world communities and their governments is needed to alleviate this refugee crisis.

The Iranian Diaspora, organizations and NGO's must provide support - There are close to five million successful Iranians living in various parts of the world and numerous Iranian human rights organizations are already in existence. They can each start to sponsor a refugee of their choice by offering employment, legal, technical, financial and medical support and advice. Iranian refugees are in desperate need of food, shelter and medical attention.

To conclude, refugees are people. People who did not want to become refugees but were forced from their home land, fleeing from arrest, rape, torture and death. These people deserve to go on with their lives, not be held in limbo in excess of one to three years while life passes them and their families by. The lengthy delay in assisting these refugees' applications is causing severe depression in people already persecuted before they fled. The longer they stay in transition states like Turkey the more danger they continue to be in. Agents from the Iranian Regime continue to threaten them from what is an open border between Iran and Turkey. In effect, they have moved from one prison to another. The

delays that refugees are subjected to also put a financial burden on the taxpayers in every nation through which the refugees move. With faster and more effective assistance, they could again become productive members of society, as well as saving millions to all countries involved.

[i] "The Massacre of Political Prisoners in Iran, 1988", published by Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation.

[ii] "Iran: Election Contested, Repression Compounded," pg. 17, Amnesty International Report, Dec. 10, 2009.

[iii] Report on the Situation of Iranian Refugees in Turkey, Post June 12th, 2009, One year later, Omid Advocates for Human Rights

[iv] UN General Assembly, *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, 28 July 1951, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 189, p. 137 (available at:<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3be01b964.html>).

[v] Women who fled after Iran's summer unrest tells of 'revenge' attack in Turkey,<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/dec/17/iran-refugee-sabri-turkey>