

IRAN
Ahwaz Human Rights Organization
Submission to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
Universal Periodic Review: 7th Session of the UPR Working Group, February 2010

A. Introduction

Keywords: arbitrary arrest and detention, linguistic rights, freedom of religion and freedom of expression, women's rights, demographic manipulation, indigenous rights,

Ahwaz Human Rights Organization is an NGO dedicated to the defense of human rights of the Ahwazi Arab minority people in Iran - study of their history, culture, socioeconomic conditions and the political climate. AHRO combines activism with the efforts to provide important, relevant and reliable information through the dissemination of scholarly and/or scientifically researched work and newsworthy information relevant to Ahwazi-Arabs in Iran.

In the suspicious absence of an official census, the population of the Arab-Iranian (Ahwazi-Arab) group has been estimated to be 5-7 million in Khuzestan and 8-10 million throughout Iran (8-11% of the population).¹ Please note that the CIA claim that 3% of the Iranian population is Arab a flagrantly flawed figure, allegedly based on census figures from the 1950s.

The towns and cities populated by the Ahwazi Arabs in Khuzestan continue to bear the scars of the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s where major cities of the province completely or partially destroyed and at least 12,000 Ahwazis died.² Despite their commitment to Iran's territorial integrity, the Ahwazis have continued to be viewed with suspicion and hostility, by Tehran. This report will document how the Ahwazi Arabs have been subjected to a sustained program of land confiscation and 'ethnic restructuring' **forced assimilation and 'Persianization'**. Ahwazis have faced not only social and economic discrimination (enduring hardship, poverty, illiteracy and unemployment at higher rates than the national average), but also a prolonged 'kulturkampf', waged against them by the Iranian regime.

B. The Human Rights Situation on the Ground

Inadequate representation for Ahwaz Arabs

The Islamic Republic has consistently ignored the demands of national groups for autonomy and self rule and to implement Articles 15 and 19 of the 1979 Constitution which guarantee the use regional languages and equal rights of ethnic groups³ it does not acknowledge and/or recognize the existence of Ahwazi-Arabs as a people, nationality or a community in Iran.

Arabs are faced with **discrimination in the Oil Industry and the Iranian civil service**. Of the top 25 governmental positions, only two or three are Arabs. This 10-15% ratio of Arabs to non-Arabs in the Ahwaz City administration drops to less than 5% at the provincial level. This means that almost 70% of the populations of Khuzestan (the Arabs) hold less than 15% of the key and important governmental positions. With inadequate political representation, the Ahwazi Arabs are unable to address the injustices faced by their people in the economic, cultural, political and judicial sphere.

Economic Conditions

As a signatory of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which states in Article 1.1 that "*All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development*" and in Article 1.2 that "*all peoples may, for their own ends, freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources... in no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence*".

Although Khuzestan is the richest province which produces 90% of Iran's oil, one third of its urban population lives in

¹ Youssef Azizi Bani Torouf, *The Identity and Ancestry of the Indigenous Khuzestani (Ahwazi) Arabs of Iran: A Nation or an Ethnic Group?*, Speech to the Industrial University of Isfahan, 1999, pp. 9-11 (<http://www.ahwaz.org.uk/images/identity.pdf>)

² Ibid

³ <http://www.iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/Government/constitution-2.html>

appalling conditions.⁴ Oil revenues from the province are largely spent elsewhere. The Iranian government has consistently refused to allocate just 1.5% of oil revenues to Khuzestan, (as requested by the province's representatives in the Majlis (parliament)).⁵ High poverty rates are the result of racial discrimination in employment. Ahwazi Arabs are denied jobs, while the government confiscates their land for residential developments to house non-Arabs enticed from outside the province with incentives such as zero-interest loans

Despite the province's fertility and potential in agriculture, farms are suffering from a lack of investment and are underperforming, leading to rural poverty.⁶ Ahwazi NGOs believe that urban poverty is far worse than the government is prepared to admit. The unemployment rate in the province's Persian majority city of Dezful is 7%, whereas in the Arab majority cities of Abadan and Mohammerah (Khorramshahr) the rate is 41% and 60% respectively.

Forced Migration and Land Confiscation

Despite Iran's Constitution and signature of the ICCPR, there is strong evidence that the Iranian authorities are orchestrating a policy of land confiscation and forced migration are in line with the "ethnic restructuring" program outlined in a top secret letters written by Sayed Mohammad-Ali Abtahi when he served as Iran's Vice-President (see Appendix 1) and Brigadier General Gholamali Rasheed (see Appendix 2). The Abtahi letter was leaked to the international media in 2005, prompting the April intifada in Ahwaz in which over 100 Ahwazis were killed by security forces.

In violation of the ICCPR, the Iranian authorities are encouraging the forced migration of Arabs out of Khuzestan and their replacement with "loyal" ethnic groups, particularly ethnic Persians, erecting separation walls to segregate indigenous Arabs from non-indigenous and privileged migrants. The regime is encouraging ethnic Persians to settle on the land confiscated from Ahwazi Arab farmers by placing advertisements in Farsi-speaking provinces and cities which promise cheap fully-furnished apartments with all amenities, which is in stark contrast to the squalor of the slums and villages where most Ahwazi Arabs reside. The government also provides economic incentives and enticements - such as zero-interest loans which are not available to Arabs to re-settle non-Arab people onto expropriated Arab farmlands.

More than 6,000 hectares of Ahwazi farmland north of Shush has been taken to "resettle the faithful non-indigenous Persians", according to directives by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Revolutionary Corp Command. These policies have forced Ahwazi Arabs into poor shanty towns around Ahwaz City⁷, the sixth biggest city of Iran. More than 15,000 Arab farmers, who have been made landless by the government's land confiscation program, have been forced to resettle in a camp named "Bhehsheti" outside city of Mashahd in the north eastern Iranian province of Khorassan. Around 47,000 hectares of Ahwazi Arab farmland in the Jofir area has been transferred to "Isargaran" non-indigenous Persian settlers, government trusted agents and the families of members of the security forces. A further 25,000 hectares has been taken from Ahwazi Arab farmers and given to the government-owned "Shilat" corporation and government agencies.

The homes of 4,000 Arab residents of Sapidar, many of whom fought for Iran in the Iran-Iraq War, were destroyed and bulldozed over in 2003. In September 2004, the Iranian regime began a large housing project to resettle ethnic Persians to Khuzestan, while continuing to force ethnic Arabs to migrate to other provinces. Completed settlements include the Ramin-2 townships 45 km south of Ahwaz built to resettle 500,000 non-Arabs and the Shirinshahr settlement north of Ahwaz to settle 50,000 ethnic Persians from central provinces. Similar resettlement projects are underway in predominantly Arab cities, towns and villages such as Mahshar, Khorramshar, Abadan, Hamiodieh and Sosangard Mula-Sani. In early 2006, the Iranian government issued an announcement that outlined further expansion of the Ramin settlement, which involved further confiscations of Ahwazi Arab lands in areas of Sanicheh and Jalieah, plaque # 29 and 42 of zone 5 of Ahwaz, in accordance with the attached layout [picture available if needed].

Since 2005, the Creation of the military-industrial Arvand Free Zone (AFZ) has involved the mass expulsion of Arabs and the destruction of their villages. In all, up to 500,000 Ahwazi Arabs could be displaced by the creation of a 5,000 square km security zone along the Shatt Al-Arab, which includes the AFZ (see *Appendix 2*). The total land area of the AFZ is around 155 sq km and includes Arab towns and villages.

⁴ Mehdi Kia and Ardeshir Mehrdad, *Mobilise the Dispossessed*, Weekly Worker 661, 22 February 2007 (<http://www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/661/shanty.htm>)

⁵ *Forced Migration and Land Confiscation: Ahwazi Arabs in Iran's Khuzestan Province*, British Ahwazi Friendship Society, (<http://www.ahwaz.org.uk/land.pdf>)

⁶ *Khuzestan is the richest province, but ...*, Karoon newspaper, 6 May 2007

⁷ *The main shanty towns are Lashkar-Abad, Raffish-Abad, Gavmish-Abad, Kut Abdullah, Haseer-Abad, Zowieh, Zergan, Daghaghla, Seyeed Khalaf, Mallashieh, Shileng-Abad*

Adequate Housing

As a signatory of the **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** (ICESCR), Iran has recognized in Article 11.1 ‘the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living... including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions’. The Iranian State is not living up to its responsibilities under this Covenant as over a million Ahwazi Arabs in Khuzestan live in **shanty towns** which are cut off from non-Arab settlements with separation walls. These areas lack everyday necessities such as plumbing, electricity, telephone, pavements, street lighting, public transport, sewerage systems, schools, clinics, hospitals, shops and parks. Following a visit to Khuzestan in July 2005, **UN Special Rapporteur for Adequate Housing**, Miloon Kothari, condemned the land confiscation programme aimed at Arabs and the fact that economic development was by-passing the indigenous population

Education

Most Arab villages have no schools, despite the fact that Iran is a signatory of **The Convention on the Rights of the Child**. While the illiteracy rate in Iran is about 10%-18%, it is over 50% among Arab men in Khuzestan and even higher for Ahwazi women. In non-industrial rural areas such as Fallahieh (Shadegan), illiteracy among women is close to 100%. Indigenous Ahwazi students drop out of schools at a rate of 30% at elementary level, 50% at secondary and 70% at high school because they are forced to study the “official language”, Farsi, a language which is not their’s. During the 2000/01 academic year, Arabs comprised only 7% of the 30,000 students at the University of Shaheed Chamran in Ahwaz City, although Arabs are in the majority in the provincial capital. The learning of Arabic is confined to religious study and is commonly classical Arabic rather than the local dialect. Consequently, Ahwazi Arabs are often semi-literate in their native language, but struggle with learning in a language that is foreign to them.

Healthcare Provisions

As a signatory of the **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** (ICESCR), Iran has agreed to uphold the aspirations of Article 12 to provide its citizens with the ‘highest attainable standard of physical and mental health’ including improving ‘environmental and industrial hygiene’ and facilitating access to medical care, the control and prevention of disease and the ‘healthy development of the child’.

During the Iran-Iraq War, the geographic location of Khuzestan caused the province to suffer a great deal of environmental damage, the effects of which are beginning to affect the health of the population. Residents of war-torn Arab cities of Khafajieh, Falahieh (Shadegan) and Susangard suffer from unusually high rates of skin infections, heart and kidney disease due to continued storage and use of chemical and biological materials and other related pollutants remaining from the war. Ahwazi Arab farmlands are heavily contaminated with industrial pollution and the detritus of war, leading to serious birth defects as well as skin and respiratory diseases. The government has not taken any action to remedy the situation.

In most towns in the province – Bostan, Hovazeh and Dashte Azadegan – the local population has little or no access to hospitals or specialist doctors. In these cities, sick people frequently die needlessly during emergencies, such as accidents or in childbirth. Additionally, gas flares that is a by-products of oil scattered all across the Khuzestan, the flames spout day and night, with severe health and environmental impact and violates human rights of indigenous Ahwazis

Water Supply

The right to water has been explicitly recognised in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and forms an implicit part of rights guaranteed within the ICCPR and the ICESCR. Although Ahwaz has huge water resources (about 33% of Iran’s total), the region is suffering from a water crisis. The water crisis has been caused by the long-term ecological mismanagement of the Karoon River, the largest river to flow through Ahwazi lands. Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Karoon has faced more than 400 incidents of serious contamination.

Sugar cane plantations, which were established after the government confiscated thousands of hectares of land from Ahwazi Arab farmers, place heavy demands on water supplies. The Bandar Imam Petrochemical Complex is causing major environmental devastation, according to two of Iran’s leading ecologists. Research by Dr Abbas Ismail Sari and Dr Bahram Kiaee found that a large area of Khuzestan (Ahwaz) is seriously affected by pollution from mercury and other dangerous chemicals used in petrochemicals manufacturing.⁸ Furthermore, all sewerage is dumped untreated into the main River Karoon, which supplies all the Ahwaz City’s water. As a result, water is contaminated and undrinkable.

⁸ BBC Persian Service, March 2007 (http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/science/story/2007/03/070307_si-birds-contamination.shtml)

Furthermore, the Islamic Republic has begun the implementation of a plan to divert the water resources of Karoun River to Esfahan, Yazd and other non-Arab provinces. It has also begun the sale of water from the Karkhe River, which passes through the Ahwazi Arab area of Howizeh and Boustan, to Kuwait. In December 2005, members of the *Majles* 8 representing Khuzestan province reportedly launched a petition to impeach the Minister of Energy on this issue and threatened to resign *en masse* if the practice continued⁹.

Nevertheless, in June 2007, Fatah rejected the **United Nation Environment Program's (UNEP)** concerns over the environmental impact of the government's Karoon River diversion project, despite claims that it will create an environmental disaster on the scale of the Aral Sea in Central Asia. According to local media reports, Fatah said that the government would instead step up its river diversion program, claiming that it "will not damage any part of the country and will not reduce the quota of water of any province."¹⁰ Anger over water management has fuelled anti-government sentiment among Ahwazi Arabs. In a documentary, one Arab tells the interviewer: "We went to the provincial governor, but the government doesn't care. We are Iranians, so why are we treated like dogs?"¹¹

Despite the region's large rivers and reservoirs, these ecologically irresponsible activities often lead to shortages in available drinking water, which is badly contaminated and regularly cut off. At an environmental conference at Azad University held in Ahwaz City in December 2006, Dr Hormoz Mahmmodi Rad, the head of Khuzestan's environmental organization, described the situation affecting the province's natural environment as 'worrying' and 'chaotic' with serious consequences for **human health**¹².

In many areas, the water is so heavily polluted by the heavy oil industry that water needs more treatment to be fit to drink. Some villages report that their **children's** teeth have turned yellow as a result of too much chlorine in the water. Furthermore, in Khafjeh, in the western part of the province, the situation has become so bad that schools are failing to provide safe drinking water to children and have closed. Rural people like the marsh Arabs whose lives are based on hunting and fishing are in great danger. According to a report published last year by some researchers, in one small village there were 10 cases of **pregnant women losing their baby**.

Women

Due to discrimination in education, almost all Ahwazi women living in rural areas are illiterate. This is in violation of International conventions and Iran's constitution.¹³ The provincial government consistently refuses to appoint an Ahwazi to the role of women's officer. In 2006, the wives of four prominent Ahwazi rights activists were imprisoned by the Iranian authorities in order to force their husbands to confess to committing terrorist acts.¹⁴ The women were held for months along with their young children, who were aged between two and four. Two pregnant women were also held in detention. One of the women, Sakina Naisi, suffered a miscarriage due to poor treatment she received in prison. Sakina was taken into custody in February when she was three months pregnant and was reportedly subjected to physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her prison guards.

Imprisonment and detainment

At least 81 people were arrested on 3 November 2005 during the week preceding the end of Ramadan, *'Id al-Fitr*, whilst attending an Arab cultural gathering called *Mahabis* which traditionally takes place during the *iftar* (breaking of the fast). Those arrested included **Zahra Nasser-Torfi**, director of the Ahwaz al-Amjad cultural centre who was reportedly tortured in detention; **Hamid Haydari**, a poet; and six members of the same family: **Mohammad Mojadam**, **Hamid Mojadam**, **Mehdi Mojadam**, **Rasoul Mojadam**, **Khaled Bani-Saleh** and **Hassan Naisi**. On 14 November 2005 a number of those people were reportedly released on bail to await trial, including Zahra Nasser-Torfi.

Hundreds of Arabs have been arrested since President Ahmadinejad's election and many are feared to have been tortured or ill-treated. The prisons in Khuzestan province, and particularly the capital Ahwaz, are reported to be extremely overcrowded as a result of the large numbers of arrests. Children as young as 12 are reported to have been detained with

⁹ <http://www.ahwaz.org.uk/2006/01/khuzestan-mps-threaten-mass.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.sepehrnews.ir/?p.4513>

¹¹ Documentary on the Karoon River environmental disaster (<http://www.tv.ahwazmedia.com/video/documentary/karoon.wmv>)

¹² <http://www.irna.ir/fa/news/view/menu-155/8510068313150243.htm>

¹³ <http://www.iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/Government/constitution-2.html>

¹⁴ <http://web2.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDI130342006?open&of=ENG-IRN>

adult prisoners. Some of those detained are believed to have been sentenced to imprisonment or death after grossly unfair trials before Revolutionary Courts

One ex-detainee estimated that during his time in detention, there may have been over 3,000 prisoners held in Karoun Prison, designed to accommodate about 800 and that the cells were so crowded that detainees were forced to sleep in shifts, as there was insufficient space for them all to lie down at once. This degree of over-crowding reportedly led to extremely unsanitary conditions.

Death Sentences

As a signatory of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Iran is obliged to uphold Article 6 which prohibits the arbitrary deprivation of life and Article 9, which prohibits arbitrary arrest or detention and stipulates standard procedures. In violation of this covenant, Ahwazi dissidents charged with **'enmity with God'** – which is punishable with the death penalty - invariably face secret trials by Revolutionary Courts, with little or no access to their lawyers.

Trials last no more than a few hours, with no witness statements and prosecution "evidence" relying on confessions extracted through torture. Defense lawyers have also been intimidated, arrested and charged with acting against national security in an effort to ensure that legal representatives enter guilty pleas on behalf of their clients. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have campaigned against the **unfair trials** of Ahwazi Arabs¹⁵. Amnesty International has recorded no less than 28 executions in Iran in the last 36 months including the four on 14 February 2007.¹⁶

In many cases, dissidents are forced to give **televised confessions** on the state-run provincial television station Khuzestan TV, in which they admit to working on behalf of foreign governments – particularly the UK and Israel. On 13 November 2006, Khuzestan TV, broadcast a documentary film in which three men who were executed the previous day, and six others convicted in the same case, were shown "confessing" to causing bomb explosions. They were said to be members of an Iranian-Arab militant group that is not known to have been active since the time of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.

On 10 January 2007, three leading UN human rights experts - Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; Leandro Despouy, UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers; and Manfred Nowak, UN Special Rapporteur on torture - jointly called on the government of Iran to "stop the imminent execution of seven men belonging to the Ahwazi Arab minority and grant them a fair and public hearing." Four of the seven individuals to whom the UN experts referred were Mohammad Jaab Pour, Abdulmir Farjallah Jaab, Alireza Asakreh and Khalaf Derhab Khudayrawi, all of whom were executed on 24 January 2007.

On February 2007, in their correspondence with the Government of Iran, the UN independent experts expressed their concerns about the charges of "mohareb". The correspondence said that "**Mohareb**" **can be translated as "being at war with God" and is a charge typically waged by the Iranian prosecutors against political dissidents, critics of the Government and persons accused of espionage.** This charge carries with it the risk of being too vague to satisfy the very strict standards of legality set by international human rights law for the imposition and execution of the death penalty. [...] ¹⁷ The three experts indicated that in August and November 2006 they had sent two letters to the Government of Iran, bringing the allegations of unfair trial and torture to their attention and seeking clarification from the Government. No reply to these letters was ever received. Instead, three of the ten men were executed in mid-December with no regard for the strong concerns expressed on behalf of the UN Human Rights Council

C. Recommendations

1. Stop the diversion of Karoon River and return the expropriated land to Ahwazi-Arab farmers.
2. Allow teaching of Arabic in schools in Khuzestan at least through 6 years of elementary schools.
3. Implementation of articles 15 and 19 of the constitution and allow for internal autonomy and acknowledgement of multi-cultural society.
4. Allow a UN fact finding mission to visit Khuzestan and report to the General Assembly on the violation of human rights.

¹⁵ Amnesty International condemns executions after unfair trials, AI Index: MDE 13/016/2007, 15 February 2007 (<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMD130162007?open&of=ENG-2D2>)

¹⁶ Amnesty International condemns executions after unfair trials, AI Index: MDE 13/016/2007, 15 February 2007 (<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMD130162007?open&of=ENG-2D2>)

¹⁷ UNHCR Press Release, 10 January 2007 (<http://www.unhcr.ch/hurricane/hurricane.nsf/0/31A0C4FE25DC547EC125725F005D3DDA?opendocument>)