
“People's Mojahedin of Iran” - Mission Report

(Sunday, 13 November 2005) -

Introduction

On 18 May 2005, the US based Human Rights Watch issued a 28-page report entitled ‘No Exit: Human Rights Abuses Inside the MKO Camps’. The Report makes a series of serious allegations against Iran’s main opposition movement, the People’s Mojahedin Organisation of Iran. This includes allegedly subjecting ‘dissident members to torture and prolonged solitary confinement’; as well as alleging ‘two cases of death under interrogation’.

The report is based on 12 hours of telephone interviews with 12 individuals who claim to have been mistreated while they were in the People’s Mojahedin Organisation of Iran’s camps in Iraq. One witness claims to have been in solitary confinement for eight and a half years. Four of the witnesses left the People’s Mojahedin Organisation 13 years ago and since then, have had no connection with the organisation. Eight of the witnesses went to Iran after leaving the People’s Mojahedin Organisation of Iran, and then arrived in Europe.

Rejecting calls by US congressmen and former officials, as well as European parliamentarians to remove the People’s Mojahedin Organisation of Iran from the list of terrorist organisations, Joe Stork of Human Rights Watch said ‘The Iranian government has a dreadful record on human rights,’ ‘but it would be a huge mistake to promote an opposition group that is responsible for serious human rights abuses.’

The report, prepared by a respected non-governmental organisation, naturally caused alarm in international human rights circles, as well as from Parliamentarians, lawyers, jurists and exiled Iranian communities across the world.

Upon closer scrutiny of the report, dozens of political, legal and human rights figures and organisations expressed concern about what they described as the flawed methodology used by Human Rights Watch in the preparation of the report, which according to them, made the findings of the report unsafe. Further concerns were raised about the unexpectedly political nature of the report, and in particular its de facto political recommendation against removing the People’s Mojahedin Organisation of Iran from terrorist lists.

Friends of a Free Iran, wrote to Human Rights Watch a number of times, raising concerns about the methodology employed in preparing the report, as well as requesting clarification on some of the specific alleged incidents of rights abuses. Friends of a Free Iran did not receive a response and thus decided to conduct its own investigation. It also learned that Human Rights Watch did not respond to others, including Lord Avebury who repeatedly requested a written response from the organisation, to no avail.

Friends of a Free Iran Investigation

In order to conduct an impartial and thorough investigation into the allegations of abuse made against the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran, and to investigate whether or not there was any evidence to corroborate the allegations, Friends of a Free Iran conducted a 5 day trip to Camp Ashraf, where the delegates randomly talked to over one hundred residents and held private and lengthy interviews with 19 individuals who had specific knowledge of the Human Rights Watch witnesses. In addition, the delegation was able to make unannounced inspections of the alleged sites of abuse. Whilst at Camp Ashraf, the delegation was provided unrestricted access to all residents and locations.

Further, Friends of a Free Iran reviewed websites critical of the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran, which contained various allegations against the organisation of varying degrees of seriousness, as well other literature critical of the organisation. The National Council of Resistance of Iran and People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran's official websites were also reviewed. Finally, Friends of a Free Iran had access to previous correspondence between Lord Avebury, then president of the British Parliamentary Human Rights Group and Human Rights Watch, which provided the delegation with valuable information.

Human Rights Watch Methodology

Human Rights Watch's methodology in the preparation of the report was widely criticised by human rights advocates, NGOs and political dignitaries. In dozens of letters, they highlighted the specific flaws in this regard.

The most common issues raised, were why Human Rights Watch failed to allow the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran the right to respond to the allegations before the publication of the report. The People's Mojahedin had repeatedly invited Human Rights Watch to visit its bases in Iraq but the organisation decided to publish its report without taking advantage of the opportunity to conduct independent on site investigations.

Human Rights Watch ignored available information, including observations by independent sources and detailed responses to some of the allegations by the National Council of Resistance of Iran or People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran, to allegations raised by the same individuals, or generally the Iranian regime. The organisation was also questioned for ignoring information that queried the credibility of its witnesses. This too was available.

Human Rights Watch chose not to seek the opinion of the US army and coalition forces, who have been in charge of the safety and security of Camp Ashraf, where People's Mojahedin members reside. Since 2003, several US agencies have interviewed and screened every member of the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran in Camp Ashraf and reached the conclusion that none have links to terrorism nor have they been in violation of US law.

Human Rights Watch Witnesses

Human Rights Watch has relied on 12 hours of telephone interviews with 12 individuals, who have already been exposed as having ties to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence. It is widely believed that such a limited investigation is insufficient to reach definitive conclusions about allegations of such veracity. Indeed, a glance at various sites run by these individuals and their associates, illustrate their active involvement in a campaign against the People's Mojahedin, which is widely believed to be orchestrated by Iran's Ministry of Intelligence.

Furthermore, Friends of a Free Iran learned that Human Rights Watch had failed to talk to hundreds of former members of the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran, who currently reside in Europe and present a different picture of life in the Mojahedin Camps in Iraq. It is not known how the 12 witnesses were selected. Human Rights Watch has been asked to clarify this, but has failed to respond.

Substance of the Report

Friends of a Free Iran investigated the specific allegations raised in the report. A very important case was the allegation that Mr. Gorbani Torabi was killed under torture during interrogations in

People's Mojahedin camps. Mr. Torabi's wife and sister denied the allegation and said he had died of a heart attack. They said Mr. Torabi was a former political prisoner who suffered years of torture in Iran, because of his support for the People's Mojahedin.

Another case pursued by the delegation were allegations raised by Mohammad Hossein Sobhani. He said he spent eight and half years in solitary confinement. Friends of a Free Iran spoke in length with his ex-wife. She denied that he had ever been jailed and provided the delegation with information about his links with the Iranian regime, through his brother. Friends of a Free Iran also obtained information from other sources, including a letter from Massoud Mahmoudi who also suggested that Sobhani is an agent of the Iranian regime. Mr. Mahmoudi was in contact with agents of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence in Europe for seven years. The credibility of Mr. Sobhani's claim was further undermined by inconsistencies in his own statements to Human Rights Watch and others.

Friends of a Free Iran were also able to look into specific allegations made by Mohammad Reza Eskandari and his wife Tahereh Eskandari (Khorami). They claim to have been imprisoned by the People's Mojahedin. The delegation spoke to Leila Ghanbari, the ex-wife of another HRW witness, Habib Khorrami and the sister in law of the Eskandari's. She revealed to Friends of a Free Iran that they were never jailed and in fact when they asked to leave, the organisation made arrangements for them to go to the UN monitored camp Al-Tash in Iraq. Under pressure from her ex-husband, Leila Ghanbarie also left the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran, but soon decided to return. She witnessed in Al-Tash camp agents of the Iranian regime actively trying to recruit former members of the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran. The People's Mojahedin also provided the delegation with undeniable evidence, including correspondence by the Eskandari family and Habib Khorrami, requesting that the People's Mojahedin let them stay in the organisations exit facility, whilst assisting them financially to leave Iraq for Europe. This correspondence relates to a time after they had left the organisation, thus any claims that the letters were written under pressure from the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran is simply invalid.

Regarding the death of Mr. Ahmadi under torture, Friends of a Free Iran talked to a People's Mojahedin official who explained how Mr. Ahmadi was killed in a mission by the Iranian regime. His account was confirmed by correspondence between the National Council of Resistance of Iran with Amnesty International several years ago regarding the death of a number of People's Mojahedin members, including Parviz Ahmadi, through infiltrators. While this may not be considered concrete evidence, in the absence of evidence to support the allegation, this would suggest the allegation should be dismissed.

In the course of Friends of a Free Iran's trip to Camp Ashraf, the delegation found the internal relations within the People's Mojahedin very different to that portrayed by Human Rights Watch. Friends of a Free Iran came to the conclusion that Camp Ashraf residents are resolute individuals, who voluntarily choose to be there, committed to establishing freedom and democracy in their country.

The Political Context

Friends of a Free Iran's research, revealed the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran have for many years, been the subject of an extensive misinformation campaign orchestrated by the Iranian regime. The delegation came across several cases of alleged human rights violations by the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran, which were later proved to be false.

Finally, Friends of a Free Iran believes there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the Human Rights Watch report was politically motivated. Far beyond the mandate of a human rights organisation, and in tandem appeasement advocates, Human Rights Watch lashed out at Iran's main opposition, tacitly recommending that the group should not be removed from the terrorist list.

Firstly, it is wholly inappropriate for a human rights NGO to become a party to a political dispute and lobby in defence of a particular policy under the pretext of human rights.

Secondly, as Human Rights Watch's recommendation is a political one, Friends of a Free Iran disagrees with the Human Rights Watch recommendation and believes the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran must be removed from the terror list.

Recent developments in Iran leave little doubt that the policy of appeasement has failed. The time has come to end this failed policy. Continuing with the policy of appeasement is a recipe for disaster as far as the Iranian people and the international community is concerned.