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26 June 2006

IRN101297.FE

Iran: The treatment of student protestors or activists since 2002
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Events of 2002

The Supreme Leader's university representative stated that "only three students remain in prison in connection with the July 1999 [student protests]" (RFE/RL 8 July 2002). However, *The New York Times* indicated that eight students remain in prison for their participation in the July 1999 demonstrations at Tehran University (10 July 2002). The newspaper also reported that nearly 3,000 people crowded into the streets to commemorate the third anniversary of the July 1999 student protests, despite the main student organization's decision not to go ahead with the demonstration (*The New York Times* 10 July 2002). Witnesses said that tear gas was used, demonstrators were arrested and security forces dragged participants-including old women-on the ground (ibid.).

A news agency reported that, following the July 2002 celebrations commemorating the student unrest in 1999, 200 people were arrested; among these people, some 140 were "temporarily detained" (Deutsche Presse-Agentur 22 July 2002). Most were released "after signing a written assurance not to attend such gatherings again", but 52 had to go to court for national security infractions (ibid.).

In December 2002, members of the public joined the protesting students; many were arrested and beaten, and police used tear gas to disperse the demonstrators (*The Times* 10 Dec. 2002). According to *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2004*, security officers used batons, whips and belts to suppress the protest (28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 2b). In addition, on 10 December 2002, a group of students who had gathered at Allameh University in Tehran were attacked by the Basij militia (AFP 10 Dec. 2002; RFE/RL 16 Dec. 2002). No additional information about arrests or charges could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Events of 2003

According to Agence France-Presse (AFP), the deputy interior minister in charge of security said that "in the recent student troubles, more than 250 people were arrested, including 35 percent who were counter-revolutionaries or thugs" (16 June 2003). All the arrested people were released except the counter-revolutionaries or thugs (AFP 16 June 2003). The same article reported that one

person was killed in Shiraz in circumstances that remain unclear; however, "the latest protests mostly passed off peacefully" (*ibid.*).

The Associated Press indicated that two university dormitories were attacked in June 2003 and some students were beaten up or taken away (14 June 2003). In one of those attacks, "more than 50 students were injured and . . . about two dozen had disappeared" (AP 14 June 2003; see also *Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 2b). However, the number of students who were injured in that attack varies depending on the source: one Iranian press agency reported that approximately 80 students were "beaten" (IRNA 18 June 2003), while *The Economist* reported a total of 70 people injured (21 June 2003). A representative of the judiciary stated that many of the people believed to be responsible of the attacks "have been identified and arrested" (AP 14 June 2003).

In reference to the June 2003 demonstrations, another article stated that state-linked vigilante organizations "are usually given a free hand by police to violently break up student demonstrations;" these groups even went "into student dormitories to beat sleeping students" (RFE/RL 17 June 2003).

On 10 June 2003, "vigilante and paramilitary forces known as *lebas shakhs-iha* (those who wear plain clothes)" intervened in a student demonstration against government plans to privatize Iran's universities (HRW 20 June 2003). Apparently, they injured many "demonstrators using batons, chains and knives, reportedly causing many injuries" (*ibid.*). According to *Country Reports 2005*, paramilitary organizations "harassed, beat, and intimidated" demonstrators, particularly university students (8 Mar. 2006, Sec. 2b). Human Rights Watch (HRW) indicated that university disciplinary committees reportedly hold hearings of students involved in protests (1 Oct. 2003). HRW gave the example of two students at Mazandaran University in Babolsar who were "expelled solely for participating in non-violent political demonstrations" (HRW 1 Oct. 2003). In addition, seven students have reportedly been suspended or expelled from Ferdowsi University, located in Mashhad (*ibid.*; see also RFE/RL 3 May 2006 and Freedom House July 2005).

Amnesty International (AI) indicated that, following the June 2003 events, around 4,000 people were arrested, half of whom were still held in mid-July 2003 (1 Aug. 2003; see also *Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 2b.). AI also reported that "the Special Forces permitted some plain clothed groups to attack peaceful demonstrators ... in some instances, excessive force was used to break up the demonstrations" (1 Aug. 2003). In addition, "some protesters were attacked by groups of plain clothed militants on motorcycles wielding iron bars and others were reportedly abducted" (AI 1 Aug. 2003).

Events of 2004

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) indicated that, according to the *Iran Daily*, a Yazd University student association was banned for four months, starting on 18 July 2004, and that "three members of the student association reportedly face[d] charges of provoking student unrest and participating in the July 1999 demonstrations in Tehran" (17 Aug. 2004). The student association had permitted "the reading of a message from the banned Freedom Movement's leader, Ebrahim Yazdi," among other things (RFE/RL 17 Aug. 2004).

According to a 2004 HRW report published in 2004 on the consequences of the July 1999 demonstrations, "many students have suffered permanent physical

and psychological injuries while in detention" (7 July 2004). HRW stated that "many of the imprisoned students have been brutally tortured in prison, barred from seeing their attorneys, and forced to provide recantations and confessions to the state-controlled media" (HRW 7 July 2004). The Iranian Democratic Front spokesman stated that some of the students who were detained following the anniversary of the 1999 events had been "tortured" (RFE/RL 19 July 2004). *Country Reports 2005* indicated that, in December 2004, approximately 130 students were still being detained (8 Mar. 2006, Sec. 2b). AI also published a document that describes the treatment of two students who were imprisoned for their participation in the events of July 1999 (7 July 2004; see also Freedom House 8 July 2004).

In its 2004 annual report, HRW noted that "severe physical torture" was also used in Iran, especially against student activists and other people who do not enjoy a high public profile (Jan. 2005). HRW also reported that quasi-official bodies of repression, called "'parallel institutions' (*nahad-e movazi*)[,] have carried out brutal assaults against students" and are known for being "increasingly open in crushing student protests" (Jan. 2005).

Freedom House indicated that few demonstrations were held in 2004 "because of the public's deepening political apathy and fear of reprisals by vigilantes" (2005).

Events of 2005

AFP indicated that students took part in a protest in March 2005, but that "they were peacefully stopped by police" (24 May 2005). AFP reported that an Iranian student had been sentenced to 18 months in jail and 76 lashes on charges of "'propagating against the regime' and 'disturbing public order'" for taking part in the 9 July 2003 events (26 Apr. 2005; voir aussi ANSA 27 Apr. 2005).

Reuters reported that a student activist, Abdollah Momeni, was sentenced to five years in prison in December 2005 on various charges, including "acting against state security" (20 Dec. 2005). Another student, Ali Afshari, was sentenced to six years in prison "for acting against national security" (*The Chronicle of Higher Education* 7 Oct. 2005; *Country Reports 2005* 8 Mar. 2006, Sec. 1e). His sentence was handed down at the same time that the head of Iran's court system called for the release of all student activists (*ibid.*; *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 7 Oct. 2005). Observers said that the case was an indication of the government's approach to political dissent (*ibid.*).

Country Reports 2005 stated that, in November 2005, the Justice Minister said that he would ask the supreme leader to release 18 students but no action had been taken at the end of 2005 (8 Mar. 2006, Sec. 1e). An RFE/RL article noted that the Science, Research, and Technology Ministry had submitted to the judiciary a ... list of imprisoned students who should be pardoned" (3 Nov. 2005). In the same article, the spokesman of the student committee for the defence of political prisoners stated that "political prisoners, as well as jailed students, [were] being held in solitary confinement or with ordinary criminals, and some [had] not been allowed to see their families for months at a time" (RFE/RL 3 Nov. 2005). According to the Website for the *Iran Daily*, "three student prisoners [were] among those most likely to be pardoned on Bahman 22 (February 11), which marks the victory of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran" (25 Jan. 2006). "Amnesties are generally granted on national or religious occasions in

Iran" (*Iran Daily* 25 Jan. 2006). However, no information confirming the release of detained students could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Amnesty International published a report on student activist Manuchehr Mohammadi, who was imprisoned for his participation in the July 1999 demonstrations, denouncing the ill treatment he was receiving in prison (27 July 2005). Mohammadi's family members reportedly held a demonstration after learning that his health had deteriorated; "the demonstrators were reportedly attacked, and some of them badly beaten . . . Up to 40 people were reportedly arrested" (AI 27 July 2005). Mohammadi's sentence, reduced on appeal from thirteen to seven years, was extended by two years in November 2003 for "having had interviews with foreign media while on leave from prison and . . . for issuing 'political statements' while in prison" (*ibid.*).

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) cited other sources as saying that the secretary of a student association at Orumiyeh University was summoned "four times in two weeks by the university's disciplinary committee," and that seven student activists from various universities were suspended and another expelled (1 Jan. 2006).

In his testimony before the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Dr. Samii, an expert on Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan for RFE/RL, indicated that the student movement is lacking organizational unity, and "the constant threat of violence and repression has discouraged many potential activists" (19 May 2005, 5). Dr. Samii added that many "unknown prisons" exist in Iran, and that although the majority of the detainees are eventually released, the charges against them are not dismissed but merely suspended (19 May 2005, 5). "This means that the charges can be reinstated at any time and the individual can be arrested again [or] arbitrarily summoned for questioning" (Samii 19 May 2005, 5).

Events of 2006

A student at Zenjan University who is a member of Zenjan University's Islamic Students' Association was arrested without an arrest warrant on 21 January 2006 and his family's home has been "searched by members of the security forces" (AI 16 Feb. 2006). RFE/RL indicated that Radio Farda "reported a two-year suspended jail sentence for . . . a student activist convicted of 'acting against national security' by taking part in an unauthorized demonstration" (14 Mar. 2006). That same student was "earlier sentenced to solitary confinement for 50 days for participating in a student protest in 2003" (RFE/RL 14 Mar. 2006).

In a March 2006 report submitted to the United Nations, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) confirmed that "several students are still in prison in connection with the protests of 1999" (3 Mar. 2006, 3). The FIDH also indicated that, although they are not currently detained, six leaders of the student organization Tahkim Vahdat had been condemned in December 2005 to prison sentences ranging from eight months to six years (*ibid.*).

In March 2006, five activists "were handed between one-and-a-half and two years in jail" for creating an "illegal" association (AFP 15 Mar. 2006; see also ILNA 15 Mar. 2006). RFE/RL reported that in May 2006, at least two student activists were expelled from university, while "others have reportedly been banned from studying for one or several semesters" (3 May 2006).

Also, "students have regularly reported being summoned to disciplinary committees, security bodies, and courts-some have even faced jail sentences" (RFE/RL 3 May 2006). A former chancellor of Tehran University said that "the actions are aimed at crushing the pro-democracy student movement" (ibid.). According to *The Guardian*, the current regime in Iran both jails and expels students (27 Mar. 2006). The daily also indicated that students at Sharif University "were attacked . . . during an unsuccessful attempt to prevent the burial of three [Iranian] soldiers who died during the ... Iran-Iraq war" (*The Guardian* 27 Mar. 2006; see also RFE/RL 15 Mar. 2006). The authorities are attempting to transform university campuses into sacred burial grounds for martyrs in order to attract religious extremists and armed militias to the universities (ibid.; *The Guardian* 27 Mar. 2006). "Students fear that such a presence will be used to violently suppress their activities" (ibid.; see also RFE/RL 15 Mar. 2006).

The following information was provided during a 17 May 2006 telephone interview with a representative of the Student Movement Coordination Committee for Democracy in Iran (SMCCDI) based in Texas. The representative said that the situation of student activists in Iran has not improved in the last few years. The repression is "harsher," and the current regime has become more "intelligent" in how it deals with student activists. He also explained that students who have been pardoned are usually not "genuine students" or they are students who support the Islamic regime because, according to him, genuine dissidents would not be pardoned (SMCCDI 17 May 2006). As for the burial of Iranian soldiers on university campuses, the representative explained that the authorities use this tactic "to put pressure on students" and limit so-called "dissident" activities by establishing the grounds as sacred and ensuring respect for the mourning of the buried soldiers (ibid.).

This Response was prepared aft researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Attempts to contact the Alliance of Iranian Students were unsuccessful.

Internet sites, including: Alliance of Iranian Students, European Country of Origin Information Network (ECOI), Factiva, FarsiNet, *Iran Daily*, Iran Focus, Iran News Watch, Iran Press Service, Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA), Islamic

Republic News Agency (IRNA), *Middle East Times* [Nicosia], Organization for Defending Victims of Violence (ODVV), Student Movement Coordination Committee for Democracy in Iran (SMCCDI), *Tehran Times*, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR).

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