



Justice for the Victims of the 1988 Massacre in Iran

## **Civil society appeal to the UN Human Rights Council to investigate the 1988 massacre**

We, civil society organisations, many in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and human rights and legal experts welcome the recent calls by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) for an international investigation into the 1988 mass extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances of political prisoners in Iran.

The 1988 massacre took place following a fatwa by Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, which stated: *“As the [People’s Mojahedin (PMOI)] do not believe in Islam ... and as they are waging war on God ... It is decreed that those who are in prison throughout the country and remain steadfast in their support for the [PMOI] are waging war on God and are condemned to execution.”*

‘Death Commissions’ were quickly established across Iran for the purpose, and thousands of political prisoners who refused to abandon their beliefs were executed. The victims were buried in mass graves scattered throughout the country.

The perpetrators continue to enjoy impunity. They include the current Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Judiciary Chief Gholam-Hossein Mohseni Ejei.

We are concerned that lack of accountability for the perpetrators by the international community could embolden the Iranian authorities to commit further atrocities against dissident protesters and political prisoners, as was witnessed during the deadly crackdown on the nationwide protests of 2019.

### **Time for the UN to demonstrate that it means what it says through an international inquiry**

Seven UN Special Rapporteurs wrote to the Iranian authorities on 3 September 2020,<sup>1</sup> stating that the 1988 extrajudicial executions may amount to “crimes against humanity.”

Their letter stated that the failure of UN bodies to act over the 1988 massacre has “had a devastating impact on the survivors and families” and “emboldened” the

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=25503>

Iranian authorities to “conceal the fate of the victims and to maintain a strategy of deflection and denial.”

The UN experts suggested that the international community should “investigate the cases including through the establishment of an international investigation.”

On 3 May 2021, some 152 former UN officials and renowned international human rights and legal experts wrote<sup>2</sup> to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, calling for a Commission of Inquiry into the 1988 massacre.

Signatories included a former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, a former UN Deputy Secretary-General, 28 former UN Special Rapporteurs on human rights, and the chairs of previous UN Commissions of Inquiry into human rights abuses in Eritrea and North Korea. Distinguished legal professionals who signed the appeal included the former Chief Prosecutor of the UN International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, a former Special Prosecutor at the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, and the first President of the UN Special Court for Sierra Leone.

Amnesty International in a statement<sup>3</sup> on 19 June 2021 reiterated that Ebrahim Raisi had a key role in the 1988 massacre and should be “investigated for his involvement in past and ongoing crimes under international law, including by states that exercise universal jurisdiction.”

In its 2018 report *Blood-soaked secrets: Why Iran’s 1988 prison massacres are ongoing crimes against humanity*<sup>4</sup>, Amnesty International concluded that, in addition to committing the crime against humanity of murder in 1988, by extrajudicially executing thousands of political dissidents in secret, the Iranian authorities are committing the ongoing crimes against humanity of enforced disappearance, persecution, torture and other inhumane acts, including by systematically concealing the fate of the victims and the whereabouts of their remains.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://iran1988.org/open-letter-to-un-seeking-commission-of-inquiry-into-irans-1988-massacre/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/06/iran-ebrahim-raisi-must-be-investigated-for-crimes-against-humanity/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/9421/2018/en/>

On 29 June 2021, the UN Special Rapporteur on Iran, Javid Rehman, called<sup>5</sup> for an independent inquiry into the 1988 state-ordered executions and the role played by Ebrahim Raisi as Tehran deputy prosecutor. Prof. Rehman said that his office was ready to share gathered testimonies and evidence if the Human Rights Council or another body sets up an impartial investigation. He added that he was concerned at reports that some "mass graves" were being destroyed as part of a continuing cover-up.

On 4 August 2021, the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances in a report<sup>6</sup> to the Human Rights Council called for an "international investigation" into the 1988 massacre. The report stated:

***Iran (Islamic Republic of)***

*84. The Working Group reiterates the concerns expressed about the ongoing concealment of burial sites of those forcibly disappeared and allegedly executed between July and September 1988 across the country. The Working Group recalls that an enforced disappearance continues until the fate and whereabouts of the individuals concerned are established and joins the call for an international investigation into the matter.*

Human rights experts believe that the extrajudicial executions in 1988 in Iran amount to crimes against humanity and genocide. Former UN judge Geoffrey Robertson has described the killings as genocide, arguing that according to Khomeini's decree, the principal reason for the call to annihilate PMOI supporters was that they were "waging war on God." According to renowned international humanitarian law expert Prof. Eric David, what happened in 1988 "amounts to genocide."<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/exclusive-un-expert-backs-probe-into-irans-1988-killings-raisis-role-2021-06-29/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/48/57>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.lalibre.be/debats/opinions/2021/10/13/le-president-iranien-ebrahim-raissi-regne-grace-a-limpunite-internationale-Q42QAYC74BDHXDUVSSU2OCRDUU/>

We believe it's long overdue for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet to investigate the 1988 massacre.

Therefore, we urge the UN Human Rights Council to urgently challenge the impunity enjoyed by Iranian officials by mandating an international investigation into the 1988 mass executions and enforced disappearances of thousands of political prisoners which constitute ongoing crimes against humanity.

SIGNED:

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/06/iran-ebrahim-raisi-must-be-investigated-for-crimes-against-humanity/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/9421/2018/en/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/exclusive-un-expert-backs-probe-into-irans-1988-killings-raisis-role-2021-06-29/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/48/57>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.lalibre.be/debats/opinions/2021/10/13/le-president-iranien-ebrahim-raissi-regne-grace-a-limpunite-internationale-Q42QAYC74BDHXDUV55U2OCRDUU/>