

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Iran's judiciary should immediately investigate cases of sexual assaults in prison and prosecute those responsible, instead of covering up these crimes

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(New York) - Iran's judiciary should immediately investigate cases of sexual assaults in prison and prosecute those responsible, instead of covering up these crimes, Human Rights Watch said today.

Human Rights Watch has documented three cases of sexual assault in Iranian prisons on persons arrested since the disputed June 12, 2009 presidential election. In the most recent case, the medical examiner's office confirmed that multiple injuries suffered in prison by Ebrahim Mehtari, a young activist, resulted from torture and mistreatment consistent with his allegations of sexual abuse. But Judiciary authorities refused to conduct further investigations and instead told Mehtari and his family that there would be severe consequences if they talked about the abuse he suffered.

"It's shameful for Iran's government to close its eyes to official evidence of severe sexual abuse of detainees by prison authorities," said Sarah Leah Whitson.

Mehtari, 27, was first arrested on July 26 and released on August 1. On August 19, several officers whom Mehtari's family said he believed were members of the Revolutionary Guards, abducted him from his workplace and later transferred him to a location in eastern Tehran. He told Human Rights Watch that during his detention he was severely beaten repeatedly and sodomized with a baton or stick.

On August 24, he said, his captors dropped him off by car somewhere in Tehran with his hands and feet tied, bleeding, and semi-conscious. People who found him on the street took him to a hospital.

The medical examiner's office, which reports to the judiciary, examined Mehtari the next day. The report, which has been seen by Human Rights Watch, described: discoloration and inflammation under both eyes "caused by being hit with a hard object"; bruises on the left rear of his head; deep scratches on both wrists and both ankles; wounds on his right shin; second degree burns caused by a hot object around his head, neck, left shoulder, and on both hands totaling two percent of his body surface; and bruises on both buttocks and the external area of the anus caused by being hit with a hard object. The report also noted that Mehtari complained of anal pain.

Mehtari told Human Rights Watch that when hospital authorities learned he had just left the prison, they tried to destroy the medical report, but his father was able to make a copy of it while visiting him in the hospital.

A second young activist, Ebrahim Sharifi, 24, who was arrested on June 23, told Human Rights Watch that he had been raped in detention while he was handcuffed, blindfolded and his feet were tied, and that he had attempted suicide several times after his release. He said that judiciary officials had refused to accept his complaint and told him that if he spoke out about his case his family would be in danger.

The third case involved Maryam Sabri, 21, who was arrested on July 30 during the commemoration of the 40th day after the killing of Neda Soltan - whose shooting death during a demonstration shocked the world. Sabri was arrested after her photo appeared on a website connected to the Revolutionary Guard that posted pictures of protesters and asked people to identify the people in the photos so that they could be arrested. Before she was released on August 12, Sabri says, she was raped four times by the prison guards.

On August 9, in a letter published in the Etemad Melli paper, the reformist presidential candidate Mehdi Karroubi wrote that "some detained individuals stated that some authorities have raped detained women with such force, they have sustained injuries and tears in to their reproductive system."

Mehtari's is the only known case of official documentation of injuries consistent with allegations of rape with a stick. Sources close to

Karroubi, who has established a committee to investigate the condition of political prisoners detained after the elections, said that judiciary authorities told Karroubi that rapes with a stick have taken place and been documented by the medical examiner's office but that the identities of the perpetrators were unknown.

They said that judiciary authorities also asked Karroubi how Mehtari's father had been able to photograph his son's anus to document his wounds and that the authorities had used their skeptical stance to try to discredit Mehtari's allegations.

"The official documents and images of Mehtari's tortured body speak for themselves," Whitson said.

Mehtari is now outside of Iran. After he left the country, security forces raided his family's house twice. During the second raid they threatened his father with arrest if he talked about the abuse his son had suffered.

The prohibition against torture is absolute in international law, and authorities are required to investigate and prosecute those responsible. The Human Rights Committee, which authoritatively interprets the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a party, has said that complaints about ill-treatment must be investigated effectively by competent authorities. Those found guilty must be held responsible, and the alleged victims must themselves have effective remedies at their disposal, including the right to obtain compensation.

Background

On August 10, Ali Larijani, speaker of the parliament, delegated a special committee to investigate Karroubi's allegations and review evidence of the physical condition of those detained during post-election events.

On August 12, Larijani announced on behalf of the committee that Karroubi's claims were completely false and that in careful reviews of the Kahrizak and Evin prison detainees, no cases showing abuse or rape were found."

On August 29, Sadegh Larijani, the head of the judiciary and brother of the parliament speaker, appointed a committee to review allegations of those arrested during the recent events, including rape claims. The committee consisted of Ebrahim Raeesi, first deputy to the head of the judiciary, Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei, general prosecutor, and Ali Khalafi, the head of judiciary's office manager.

In their report to Sadegh Larijani on September 12, the committee wrote that they found "no evidence of rape in the cases of the individuals claimed by Mr. Karroubi," and that his claims and documents "are all fabricated and designed to divert public opinion."

The committee also demanded judicial action against those who "through propagation of falsehoods and presentation of accusations and slander" have damaged "the reputation and credibility of the government and certain symbols of it."

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