



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
16 February 2022

English and French only

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## Human Rights Council

Forty-ninth session

28 February–1 April 2022

Agenda item 4

**Human rights situations that require the Council's attention**

**Joint written statement\* submitted by Women's Human Rights International Association, Edmund Rice International Limited, France Libertes : Fondation Danielle Mitterrand, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status, Association of World Citizens, International Society for Human Rights, non-governmental organizations on the roster**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[4 February 2022]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.



## **Civil society appeal to the United Nations to investigate the 1988 massacre**

In January 2022, some 467 experts, academic institutions and civil society organisations, many in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), signed an open letter to the UN Human Rights Council welcoming 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 the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The open letter, which was also copied to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, is an attempt by the global human rights community to register its concern over the failure of the UN for more than three decades to tackle the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of the 1988 massacre.

The full list of signatories is available on the website of the London-based NGO which led the initiative, Justice for the Victims of the 1988 Massacre in Iran (JVMI).

### **The 1988 massacre**

The 1988 massacre took place following a fatwa by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini which stated: “As the [People’s Mojahedin (PMOI or MEK)] 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 the Islamic Republic of Iran for the purpose, and thousands of political prisoners who refused to abandon their beliefs were executed. As many as 30,000 prisoners are believed to have been extrajudicially executed or forcibly disappeared. 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 as well as former Justice Ministers Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi (2013-2017) and Alireza Avaei (2017-2021).

Iranian authorities are continuing to commit gross violations of human rights in relation to the 1988 enforced disappearances including by denying victims’ relatives of the right to know the truth of what happened to their loved ones and where they have been buried, by arresting and torturing victims’ relatives and activists seeking accountability and justice 1, and by desecrating and destroying 2known mass graves to prevent the truth from coming to light.

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, 3 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 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 4 to UN High Commissioner Bachelet, calling for a Commission of Inquiry into the 1988 massacre.

Amnesty International in a statement 5 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.”

As human rights groups have pointed out 6 , 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.

On 29 June 2021, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javād Reḥmān, called 7 for an independent inquiry into the 1988 state-ordered executions and the role played by Ebrahim Raisi as Tehran deputy prosecutor. Prof. Reḥmān 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 8 to the Human Rights Council called for an “international investigation” into the 1988 massacre. The report stated:

The Islamic Republic of Iran

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 the Islamic Republic of 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.”

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.

We believe it’s long overdue for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet to investigate the 1988 massacre. We urge the OHCHR to now make up for its shortcomings through a public inquiry into these ongoing atrocities in order to hold the perpetrators accountable.

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HANDS OFF CAIN Nouveaux Droits de l'Homme (France) Pax Christi Australia Justice for Victims of 1988 Massacre in Iran (JVMI) Association des femmes Iraniennes en France (AFIF) Comité de Soutien aux Droits de l'Homme en Iran (CSDHI), Association delle Donne Democratiche Iraniane in Italia, Association of Anglo-Iranian Women in the UK, Iran Libero e Democratico (Italia) Iranian youth association in Switzerland Association de Réfugiés politiques pour les droits de l'homme – France Associazione Medici e Farmacisti Democratici Iraniani in Italia Association des jeunes Iraniens pour la démocratie et la liberté-Luxembourg Association IranRef (Belgique) Irska Kvinnosamfundet i Sverige (Sweden) Anglo-Iranian Professionals Association of Iranian Political Prisoners-UK Associazione Italiana per i Diritti Umani in Iran, NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the

views expressed in this statement.

- 1) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE13/4657/2021/en/>
- 2) <https://iran1988.org/jvmi-urges-un-intervention-to-preserve-evidence-of-1988-massacre-at-khavar-an-mass-grave-in-iran/>
- 3) <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=25503>
- 4) <https://iran1988.org/open-letter-to-un-seeking-commission-of-inquiry-into-irans-1988-massacre/>
- 5) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/06/iran-ebrahim-raisi-must-be-investigated-for-crimes-against-humanity/>
- 6) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/9421/2018/en/>
- 7) <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/exclusive-un-expert-backs-probe-into-irans-1988-killings-raisis-role-2021-06-29/>
- 8) <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/48/57>