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IRAN: TORTURED PRISONERS AT EVIN PRISON ARE IN URGENT NEED OF INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION

The Iranian authorities must immediately allow independent international monitors unhindered access to Iranian prisons to investigate the harrowing use of unlawful force by security forces at Tehran's Evin prison on 15 October and to protect prisoners from further unlawful killings, torture and other ill-treatment. This latest deadly incident once again brings into sharp focus the urgent need to address the litany of crimes being committed by the Iranian authorities through an independent investigative, reporting and accountability mechanism.

The Iranian authorities have blamed prisoners for the fire that engulfed areas of Evin prison on 15 October, but evidence gathered by Amnesty International raises serious concerns that the authorities sought to justify their bloody crackdown on prisoners under the guise of battling the fire and preventing prisoner escapes. Testimonies obtained by Amnesty International from prisoners, victims' relatives, journalists and human rights defenders with contacts inside the prison reveal that prison officials at Evin prison and anti-riot police repeatedly fired teargas and metal pellets at hundreds of prisoners, and subjected many to brutal beatings with batons, particularly on their heads and faces. Amnesty International is also gravely concerned about eyewitness accounts emerging from inside the prison indicating that security forces pointed guns to the heads of several women prisoners and may have also fired live ammunition towards some male prisoners.

The Iranian authorities have so far confirmed eight deaths and 61 injuries of prisoners, but prisoners fear that the number of those killed and injured may be far higher. Consistent with long-standing patterns of denial and cover-up of their crimes, the authorities swiftly issued statements attributing the deaths to asphyxiation from smoke inhalation and fighting among the inmates.

The arbitrary and abusive force used by Iran's security forces and prison officials against prisoners who were confined within the walls of a prison affected by fire and had no chance to escape offers further evidence of the extreme brutality Iranian authorities routinely use to crush dissent. Unless there is a robust response from the international community that addresses Iran's deepening crisis of impunity for grave crimes under international law and other serious human rights violations, the number of victims will continue to grow.

The UN Human Rights Council must urgently convene a special session on Iran, and establish an independent mechanism with investigative, reporting and accountability functions to address the most serious crimes under international law and other serious human rights violations committed by the authorities in Iran. The mechanism should conduct investigations into such crimes and violations with a view to pursuing accountability, in particular where violations may amount to the most serious crimes under international law. The mechanism should be mandated and adequately resourced to gather and preserve evidence, and to share it with national, regional and international courts and administrative bodies that may have jurisdiction over crimes. Its public reporting should include analysis of patterns of crimes and violations and the identification of perpetrators.

The urgent need for robust and meaningful action by the international community has been echoed by prisoners and their families who have expressed grave concerns about their life and safety, particularly as prison visits to Evin prison have been suspended since 15 October, amid reports of authorities denying injured prisoners access to healthcare. A prisoner who suffered the brutalities of 15 October stressed the need for international protection in a call to their family: "They [the authorities] do not allow those injured to receive treatment. They say 'the worst is that you would die, and nothing would happen'... We have no safety here... If people forget us, the authorities will slaughter us all."

A relative of a prisoner held in Evin prison similarly told Amnesty International, "We do not need criticisms and condemnations... We need action beyond condemnation... How much heavier a cost should we pay?"

HARROWING USE OF UNLAWFUL FORCE

Prisoners held in building No. 8 of Evin prison have reported hearing sounds of gunfire and people screaming from around 8pm onwards on 15 October emanating from the direction of the adjacent building No. 7. Building No. 8 mostly houses unjustly imprisoned human rights defenders and dissidents, while building No. 7 is predominantly used for those convicted of theft and financial crimes. Amnesty International understands that distressed prisoners held in building No. 8 subsequently attempted to break through the main entrance of the building due to their concern for the safety of prisoners held in building No. 7. In response, prison guards and anti-riot police fired tear gas and metal pellets extensively at the prisoners. According to an eyewitness account, armed security forces stationed outside building No. 8 also fired live ammunition towards prisoners who were inside the building through windows.

Prison guards and anti-riot police subsequently handcuffed numerous prisoners from building No. 8 and repeatedly beat them with batons, targeting their heads and faces. Security forces also beat prisoners, who had sustained injuries from metal pellets, directly on their wounds. A prisoner wrote in an eyewitness account, obtained by Amnesty International through a trusted source, that the attacks were led by an official identified as a colonel, who participated in the beatings while shouting death threats at prisoners, warning that “I will make your mothers mourn your deaths. The day of your death has arrived.” According to the prisoner’s account, security forces subsequently moved hundreds of prisoners to the prison’s “gymnasium”, which is a large hall, and there, they inflicted further brutal beatings on prisoners.

As repeated sounds of gunfire reached prisoners held in building No. 5 that contains the women’s ward and building No. 4, which houses, among others, arbitrarily detained male dual nationals and political dissidents, they similarly attempted to exit their buildings. Eyewitness accounts from prisoners in these buildings reveal that security forces once again unlawfully fired tear gas. According to prisoners’ accounts, security forces also entered the women’s ward, and pointed their guns at the heads of several women prisoners while uttering threats and insults.

According to information obtained by Amnesty International, over a dozen prisoners in building No. 8 sustained painful metal pellets injuries, which have been left untreated or inadequately treated. Several prisoners in the women’s ward and building No. 4 fell ill due to exposure to tear gas. Sources interviewed by the organization also raised fears that security forces may have fired live ammunition given the severity of injuries sustained by several prisoners.

Since the deadly violence on 15 October, the authorities have suspended all Evin prison visits, which puts prisoners at further risk of torture and other ill-treatment including through the denial of medical care. Following the attack, the authorities transferred tens of prisoners from building No. 8, including individuals who had sustained injuries, to an unknown location and refused to inform their families of their fate and whereabouts. It transpired about a day later and after some prisoners were allowed to make brief phone calls that they had been transferred to Rajai’s Shahr prison in Karaj, Alborz province. The fate and conditions of many other prisoners and detainees, including those held in building No. 7, remains unclear, sparking serious concerns about their safety.

CONTRADICTORY ACCOUNTS ABOUT CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS AND FIRE BREAKOUT

On the evening of 15 October, video footage emerged online showing flames engulfing an area of Evin prison, which is a vast complex that consists of multiple buildings. According to a journalist and former prisoner of conscience with detailed knowledge of the layout of Evin prison, the fire engulfed a multi-storey building that contains a sewing workshop and an amphitheater (referred to hereafter as the workshop building), and is located in an area of the prison that is surrounded by tall walls and also contains buildings No. 7 and No. 8.

The Iranian authorities have made contradictory statements aimed at attributing the responsibility of the fire to prisoners held in building No. 7. They first claimed that the fire had erupted in the context of a fight among prisoners convicted of theft and financial crimes. On 17 October, after former prisoners stated in their interviews with independent media outlets outside Iran that prisoners would not have had access to the workshop building affected by the fire at that time of the night, and [audio-visual evidence](#) of the use of tear gas and concussion grenades within the confines of the prison emerged, the official narrative changed. This time, the officials [claimed](#) that the fire was initially caused by two or three prisoners who had attempted a prison escape by setting ablaze a few blankets in their ward and then used the ensuing chaos to reach and set fire to the workshop building, which, they alleged, prompted security forces to use force to contain the situation. The same day, the head of the judiciary, Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei, [described](#) those responsible for the fire breakout as “agents of the enemy ... who facilitated the work of Zionist, American and British centres and offices involved in stoking war and generating unrest”, and called for their swift prosecution.

Amnesty International's investigation, however, suggests that contrary to the authorities' claims, the fire breakout followed the authorities' use of unlawful force against prisoners. Multiple accounts from prisoners and their relatives indicate that the shootings started from around 8pm. This is more than one and a half hour before 9:29pm which is when, according to the [spokesperson for Tehran's Fire department](#), the fire at Evin prison was reported.

Further gaps and inconsistencies emerged in the official narrative after the emergence of [video footage](#), which depicts several individuals in plain-clothes on the roof of the workshop building, who exacerbate the fire by throwing what seems to be a flammable substance into the flames. Former prisoners with direct knowledge of the layout of Evin prison confirmed the location. They further told Amnesty International that the main doors of buildings housing prisoners are locked from around 5pm to 9am and it would be next to impossible for prisoners to reach the rooftop location seen in the video. The Iranian authorities have a long track-record of using plain-clothes officials in their security operations.

The authorities have not revealed the identity of the eight prisoners whose deaths they have confirmed and have only stated that they had been convicted of theft, suggesting they were among prisoners held in building No.7. No deaths or injuries among prison officials or other security forces engaged at Evin prison on 15 October have been reported.

According to aerial images and video footage of the area affected by the blaze, the fire appears to have been confined to the workshop building. Information obtained by Amnesty International indicates that this building is not generally used for housing prisoners, but in the past, during periods of mass arrests in the context of protests, including during the nationwide protests of November 2019, the authorities temporarily used the building as an informal detention centre for hundreds of detainees. There is no information currently available as to whether the authorities have engaged in the same practice since the eruption of the ongoing nationwide protests on 16 September 2022 and if any detainees were present in the building at the time of the incident on 15 October.

LANDMINES WITHIN EVIN PRISON GROUNDS

In a shocking report on 16 October, state-affiliated media Fars News said the explosions heard in some videos came from landmines which were detonated by fleeing prisoners. While the reports stating prisoners had stepped on landmines were later denied, the authorities did not deny the use of landmines within Evin prison grounds.

A journalist and former prisoner of conscience told Amnesty International that he had seen an explosion in January 2020 while held in building No. 8 of Evin prison, which prison officials at the time told prisoners was due to landmines detonated by a cat stepping upon them. He said the landmines are placed in the hills which are within the northern area of the prison compound, and which are visible from some of the rooms in Building No. 8. Amnesty International is aware of at least two other former prisoners at Evin prison who have [stated](#) on social media that it is common knowledge among prisoners that landmines are placed in hills located in the northern part of Evin prison and that they had themselves heard and/or seen landmines detonating during their prison terms.

Anti-personnel landmines are internationally banned, and their use is prohibited in all circumstances. The admission by state-affiliated media that landmines have been placed in close proximity to prison wards reveals the Iranian authorities' utter disregard for human life and international law. It is yet another clear proof that the authorities' cruelty, aimed at maintaining power and control, knows no bounds and involves systematic use of unlawful force that claims lives.

BACKGROUND

The attack on prisoners at Evin prison took place as security forces continue to brutally crackdown on nationwide protests seeking Iran's transition to a system respecting equality and human rights. Amnesty International has documented widespread use of [lethal force](#) by Iranian security forces against protesters, including [children](#).

Given the lack of transparency, no official statistics exist on the number of prisoners in Evin prison, but human rights groups estimate that thousands are imprisoned there. Even before the eruption of ongoing nationwide protests, hundreds of prisoners of conscience and others have been detained arbitrarily at Evin prison solely for the peaceful exercise of their human rights.