

Association of Iranian Political Prisoners in Exile (AIPP) 2008 Conference Stockholm, 22nd & 23rd August

Twenty years ago in the summer of 1988 thousands of Iranian political prisoners were taken from their cells and executed. All over Iran men and women were blindfolded and shot or hung in exercise yards or prayer halls. None of them were taken to trial, instead they were asked a few questions by what became known as the 'death commission' and sentenced to die according to their responses. The 'crimes' committed by many of these prisoners consisted of expressing their non-violent political beliefs, perhaps by selling newspapers or attending meetings and demonstrations.

On this sad anniversary AIPP's conference had two themes, commemoration and justice. Several hundred people came together to remember the victims of '88 and the never ending pain of their friends and family. But they also met to campaign for justice for these victims and an end to a culture of impunity in Iran which rewards rather than punishes those responsible for killing and torture.

The conference was held over two days at Stockholm University and Husby Traff (Community Hall). Presentations were made in Swedish and English at the University and Farsi at Husby Traff. Both days were well attended and there was standing room only for much of the time at the University. It was particularly encouraging to see many young people, proving that disgust at human rights abuses and a desire for justice endures from one generation to the next.

We were honoured by an array of inspiring and distinguished speakers, including lawyers and academics, several of them ex-political prisoners. We were also delighted to welcome Hans Linde, a Swedish MP who reminded everyone just

how much even a small country like Sweden can do on the international scene to promote respect for human rights.

Proceedings at Stockholm University were started by a speech from Ahmad Mossavi which really set the tone for the whole conference and reminded everyone just why they were there. Ahmad survived severe torture and ten years in Iranian jails; he was in Rasht prison when ninety of his colleagues were murdered in the summer '88 massacres. Ahmad gave us a glimpse of the horror of those days – the sound of shooting and doors banging, followed by a silence that seemed to become deeper and more absolute as more and more lives were snuffed out. Yet if Ahmad's speech showed us the prisoner's despair it also brought us a survivor's hope and a call to action.

The need for action was emphasised by the following two speakers, Kaveh Shahrooz and Payam Akhavan. Both gave clear, incisive summaries of the sort of action they believe is necessary if the perpetrators of the '88 killings are ever to be held to account.

Kaveh Shahrooz is a young lawyer based in New York who has written about the '88 massacres in the Harvard Human Rights Journal. Kaveh reminded us the Iranian government is responsible for two crimes, the mass killings and then a determined campaign to cover them up and pretend they never happened. We cannot turn the clock back and prevent the executions but we can make sure the victims are not forgotten and that the Islamic regime will be held to account for killing thousands of political prisoners.

Payam Akhavan is Professor of International Law at McGill University in Montreal. He served as a UN war crimes prosecutor at The Hague and kindly stopped off in Stockholm to share his expertise with us before flying on to the current conflict in Georgia. Payam made an impassioned speech and called on the international community to stop excusing or ignoring the Iranian

government's crimes in the name of cultural difference. As he said, *"These are not crimes of medieval Islam; they are the crimes of the modern, authoritarian state. It's all about maintaining power."*

Kaveh and Payam acknowledged there are many difficulties involved in defending the victims of '88, not least the fact that a significant number were members of the People's Mujahidin, a group that is often viewed with suspicion by human rights activists. It has been classified as a terrorist organisation by some governments. The presence of 'unpopular' victims is compounded by the international community's approach to Iran which focuses almost exclusively on the nuclear issue and regional security, that is the Iranian government's ambitions in the Gulf and their support for Hamas and Hezbollah in Lebanon. There is no serious, sustained interest in the Iranian people's human rights.

Faced with these hard political realities Kaveh and Payam emphasised the need for research and co-operation. There are still too many gaps in our knowledge of what happened in 1988 and these must be filled if there is to be any chance of tracking down perpetrators and bringing them to trial. To this end Payam has helped to found the Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre in New Haven. This centre is compiling a report on the 1988 massacres, using available documentation and analysing it in the light of international law.

The slow, painstaking accumulation of evidence has a double purpose – to obtain justice for the victims of '88 and to stop international support for the Iranian government. Kaveh and Payam showed how convenient the world's obsession with the nuclear question is for the Iranian regime, enabling them to repress the population and keep it as a weak, 'third world' nation.

More stress on human rights would support civil society in Iran itself, encouraging those Labour and student activists, women's groups and lawyer's associations

who battle against repression every day. Iran's extraordinarily diverse civil society is a gift that has been ignored by the outside world for too long.

Kaveh and Payam's inspired speeches clearly showed us that a successful prosecution of those responsible for the '88 massacres will have many important consequences. It will overturn the pernicious concept of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' victims, proving that human rights are everyone's right. It will undermine the whole rationale of the Iranian regime, built on the idea that violence pays.

The importance of protecting writers and journalists who criticise governments and their policies was the theme of the next speech by Maria Modig. Maria is a prominent Swedish writer who was President of Swedish PEN Writers in Prison Committee for several years. PEN stands for poets, essayists, novelists and Maria spoke about the vital role writers can play in creating an open society where independent thought is valued, not feared.

Sadly, many writers pay a high price for expressing their ideas and PEN works to protect those who face censorship, threats and imprisonment. Iran currently imprisons the highest number of journalists in the Middle East. Maria pointed out that by finding and listening to the stories of the persecuted we can spread their ideas and prevent their voices being drowned out.

Susan Bahar then spoke about the execution of children in Iran during the 1980s. Susan is Editor-in Chief of Darvag Magazine for children and young people and head of the Stop Child Labour Association. Many young people below 18 years of age were executed in Iran. Again it is important to remember that these children were not killed because they were carrying guns or drugs, or because they were dishonest or violent. They died simply because they had political beliefs and aspirations. They were shot or hung because they dared to write a slogan – 'Bread, Housing and Freedom' - on a wall.

Mitra Lager, the next speaker, is also a survivor of the 1980s massacres. She told a sad history about her co-prisoner. Fereshteh was a university student who met the love of her life, Shahram, whilst she was in hiding. Shahram and Fereshteh married but a few months later they were hunted down and imprisoned.

Shahram was sentenced to death, Fereshteh to ten years imprisonment. Fereshteh could not believe her husband would be killed and as the time of his execution drew near she became more and more distressed. She began to scream and insist that if Shahram was to be killed she wanted to die alongside him. She could not imagine living without her beloved husband. Eventually the prison authorities tired of Fereshteh's shouting – they had executed thousands of innocent people, so what difference would one more make? Fereshteh Shabani was executed together with her husband.

Two invited speakers were unable to attend but Ahmad Eskandari, conference chairman and mediator, read messages of support from Drewery Dyke, Head of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa programme in London, and Professor Shahla Talebi of Arizona State University. Professor Talebi referred to a series of prison letters, exchanged between husband and wife. An extract from one of the wife's letters brought home the sense of isolation and longing felt by so many prisoners – *'In the absence of any news about you, for hours last night, I sat in solitude with you and with the sky of our memories...I am fine and as always spend my days with sweet memories and treasured beliefs and more than ever am eager to see you.'* The prisoners' loneliness must not be compounded by our forgetting the crimes committed against them.

A film, *The Tree That Remembers*, by Iranian-Canadian director Masoud Rauf was then shown. Masoud was driven to make his film by the suicide of an Iranian ex-political prisoner, also exiled in Canada. The film inter-twines the stories of

several prisoners and their families, perfectly illustrating Payam Akhavan's words: "*Behind every victim there is a name, behind every victim there is a universe of emotions and relations.*"

Finally, it is very important to say that on both days of the conference we were entertained by a number of talented singers and musicians. Before the speeches at Stockholm University Gisso Shakeri, an Iranian singer, and Peatriz Pine'da, who is originally from Chile, performed several moving songs. Both women are blessed with voices able to express sadness and joy, hope and despair in every syllable. We all thank them very much for their unique contribution to the conference.

We hope that everyone who attended AIPP's 2008 conference found it a valuable experience. We look forward to seeing you at future events and urge you to support in every way possible our campaign for justice for all those who were executed during the 1980s, Iran's 'dark decade'.

"Difficulties should propel us to act, not despair." Kaveh Shahrooz

Written by Brigitte Istim