Ahwazi Arabs Voice their Concerns at the UN in Geneva

United Nations Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights
Working Group on Minorities, 11th Session 30 May–3 June 2005

*Intervention under Item 3(a) of the Provisional Agenda by Karim Abdian, Director of Ahwaz Education and Human Rights Foundation.*

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished members of the Working Group on Minorities, thank You for the invitation to Geneva and for this opportunity:

My name is Karim Abdian. I am the director of Ahwaz Education and Human Rights Foundation - a minority rights NGO based in the United States.

I am speaking to you on behalf of an estimated 5 million Ahwazi Arab ethnic minority who live in the Southwestern Iranian province of Khuzestan or, as called by its indigenous name, Ahwaz, or al-Ahwaz. The region borders southern Iraq, adjacent to Kuwait.

**Background:**

Ahwazi Arabs are an indigenous, ethnic, national and a linguistic minority in Iran. Iran is composed of 6 major national and ethnic groups, Persians, Turks, Arabs, Kurds, Baluchis and Turkman.

According to professor Baras-Benab, an Iranian minority rights researcher, the 70 million population of Iran is estimated to be 1/3 Persian and 1/3 Azerbaijani Turks. The remaining third is made up of Kurds, Arabs, Baluch and Turkomen. For the past 80 years however, the Persians ethnic group have been the dominant ethnic group - politically, economically, culturally, and in every other sphere of life.

Based on research and data extracted from election results in the past 25 years, Ahwazi Arabs population is about 5 million or 8% of the total population. Official data is not available as the Iranian government does not collect such data.

In fact Mr. Chairman we recommend that the Islamic Republic of Iran fulfills the recommendations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination’s (CERD/C/63/CO/6) which during its sixty-third session on August 2003, requested that the Iranian government to “provide an estimate of the demographic composition of the population, including the Arabs in the Al-Ahwaz region of Khuzestan in its periodic report.”

We should note that Mr. Yossef Azizi, Banitoruf, an Ahwazi Arab journalist, human rights and minority rights researcher who has done significant work in this area, has been arrested on 25 April, 2005 for criticizing government’s recent killing of Arabs in Khuzestan. Mr. Banitoruf remains in jail without charges, a clear violation of the United Nations protocols on the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

Prior to its military annexation by the Iranian government in 1925, Khuzestan or al-Ahwaz was an autonomous territory inhabited by indigenous Ahwazi Arab tribes for thousands of years. For the past 500 years, the region was called Arabistan,
signifying its Arab character. The name was changed to Khuzestan, a Persian name, in 1936.

After the emergence of Reza Shah in 1925 and by enforcing centralization, he invaded Arabistan, overthrew the local autonomous administration, occupied and destroyed Arabistan’s sovereignty, and subordinated the province to Iran against the wishes of its Arab inhabitants and without their involvement. The state adopted Farsi (Persian) as the sole official language- which even now spoken by less than 40% of the total population. The government shut down the schools and banned Arabic education in the province where about 90% of the people were native Arabic speakers. This ban continues today.

Confiscation of Land and Ethnic Cleansing:

The Islamic Republic government continues ethnic restructuring, confiscation of Arab land and the forced resettlement policy of the previous regime- to displace the Ahwazis out of Khuzestan and settle “loyal” ethnic Persians on the expropriated Arab farmlands. Ahwazis are being perceived as disloyal (http://www.ahwazstudies.org/default.asp?languageID=1), suspicious and a security risk- who some day may re-claim the oil rich land of Khuzestan. In the past fifteen years alone, over 250,000 hectares of Ahwazi farmers land in regions of Jufir, Shosh, Hoizeh, Hamidieh...have been forcefully confiscated and given to Persian settlers such as Isargaran –or to government-owned industrial cooperatives and agro-businesses such the Sugar-Cane Project.. This is done clearly in violation of the article 4.5 of the United Nations Declaration on Minorities.¹

Under an ethnic restructuring policy, as outlined in a recently leaked internal secret document issued by president Khatemi’s office in 1999, the Iranian government is forcing displacement of Arabs to Isfahan, Tehran and Tabriz and other non-Arab provinces aiming to reduce the Ahwazi Arab population from a 70% majority in Khuzestan to a third minority in a period of 10 years or less. Toward execution of this policy, settlements such as Ramin-2, Shirin-Shahr and others have already been built, and over one million nonindigenous Persians have been moved to Ahwazi. I submit a copy of this document to the secretariat of the UN Human Rights Working Group on Minorities its consideration.²

For the past 80 years, indigenous Ahwazis were put under political, cultural, social and economic subjugation by the past Iranian monarchist and the current clerical regimes. These regimes have consistently violated Ahwazi human rights and lowered their status to the ranks of 2nd and 3rd class citizens. Thus, the Ahwazi nation endured brutal national persecution and ethnic cleansing.

The policy of the Islamic Republic, like its predecessor, is directed at the eradication of the national identity and forceful assimilates of Ahwazi Arabs, and to a lesser degree, other nationalities such as the Turks, Kurds, Baluchis and Turkomen.

¹ According to Mr. Sahdidzadeh, Khuzestan former member of the Iranian parliament please see the link below for details on land Confiscation:
http://www.ahwazstudies.org/itemDetails.asp?languageID=1&pageID=9&itemType=1&itemID=339.

² For the original and the English translation, please see:
http://www.ahwazstudies.org/default.asp?languageID=1
Ahwazis cannot wear their national and ethnic dress and costume in official centers. They are a people ignored, they are nonofficial.³

Our children are being deprived from the use and study of their mother language and our people are being denied participation in public life and in decisions affecting them.

While the illiteracy rate in Iran is said to be about 18–20%, this rate is 60% for Ahwazi indigenous men, and much higher for the women. Some 30% of indigenous children drop out of school in elementary years, 50% in middle school and 70% at high school. That means only 1 out 4 graduates from high school.

Now, as in the previous regime, governor general of Khuzestan, all other province’s political, military and security commanders, officers, mayors and all high and mid-level government officials of Khuzestan, have consistently been appointed from non-Arabs outside of the native Arab population. Again a clear violation of Articles 2.2 and 2.3 of United Nations Declaration on Minorities, as well as articles 15 and 19 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, which allows for regional and local languages and a degree of self rule.

Indigenous Ahwazis live in extreme poverty while their ancestral land produces 4 million barrels of oil per day which funds 90% of Iranian economy. None of this wealth, is allocated to the indigenous people or their region. They do not share the riches of their land. Instead, they are subjected to degradation of the ecology, diversion of rivers and poverty.

The regime erected dams on Karkhe River that passes through an entirely indigenous Ahwazi Arab area of Howizeh and Boustan. According to news services, Iran is planning to sell water from Karkhe to Kuwait- and other Gulf countries- while Khuzestan severely suffers from the shortage of drinking water. According to Iranian media, the Iranian parliament is debating a bill to divert Karūn, the largest river in Khuzestan, to central Persian provinces. As much as 50% of the Ahwazi population suffers from absolute poverty and 80% of the children suffer from malnutrition, according to Dr. Balali, director of Dasht-Azadagan Health network in Iran.

Our people live without access to basic services such as safe drinking water, electricity, plumbing, telephone and sewage. There are no schools or hospitals or health clinics in rural areas.

Seventeen years after the war with Iraq, only 20% of the Arab-populated border towns and cities damaged or destroyed during the war have been restored, according to a member of parliament.

According to the Human Rights Watch and the Land Mine Monitor, “Millions of Land mines remaining from the Iran-Iraq war in the province of Khuzestan kill and maim indigenous inhabitants of Khuzestan in southwestern Iran every day.”

³ The aim is “Persianization” or “Farsization,” where everything must be Persian.
The government is still holding hundreds of square kilometers of Ahwazi lands occupied during the Iran-Iraq war along the border of Iraq while hundreds of thousand inhabitants of these areas still live in Mashhad, Shiraz, Karaj and Isfahan and aren’t permitted to return to their homes and villages.

Our demands for basic human rights, including education in our mother tongue, have often been labeled as "separatist", “secessionist” or called “stooges of foreign countries” or “danger to security and territorial integrity.”

The regime does not permit any genuine Arabic newspapers and media in Khuzestan.

The Iranian government authorities in Khuzestan refuse to register and issue birth identity cards to indigenous Arab newborn babies, who do not assume Persian or Shiite names. Parents are forced to choose Persian names or face the consequence of not having ID cards such as exclusion from education.

Names of cities, towns, villages, rivers and other geographical landmarks were changed from Arabic to Persian during this and previous regimes. The regime refuses to consent to the Ahwazi Arabs’ request to change the names of these landmarks back to their historical Arabic names.

This regime, like the previous one in Iran, prevents any public mention of the Ahwazi Arab minority population. It has imposed a silence and a news blockade in the national and international media against the existence of Arabs in Iran. When it does, usually it is a systematic campaign of hatred and misrepresentation calling them as gypsies and as an inferior race.

The regime refuses to release thousands of indigenous Ahwazi Arab political prisoners. Many of these prisoners have been kept in prison for over 20 years. Some are ill, frail and old.

Massacre of April 15, 2005 in Ahwaz and Other Recent Events:

Mr. Chairman: On 15 April 2005, last month, in the provincial city of Ahwaz, about 4000 indigenous Ahwazi Arabs demonstrated peacefully against diversion of their water resources and against ethnic restructuring and poverty.

Iranian security forces opened fire on unarmed demonstrators killing at least 61 men, women and children, injured over 800 and arrested thousands, according to Amnesty International and Human Rights watch and wire services (Iran claims only 7 killed). Local activists put the killing at least 150. The government asks the families to pay $1800-bullet money- to return the bodies to their families.

According to residents of Khuzestan, a large size Revolutionary Guard (Sepah) and Basiji security force units have been deployed to the area. Khuzestan is currently under siege and cordoned off. No reporters or observers are allowed into the province.

Mr. Youssef Azizi Banitorof, a well-known indigenous Ahwazi writer, journalist and researcher has been detained on an unknown location since 25 April for his
certaining the government killing of peaceful indigenous demonstrators. Despite poring of letters from the UN, and international NGOs and Human Rights organizations requesting his release.

**Recommendations: We Urge and Recommend the following:**

1. That WGM recommend the upcoming visit of Special Reporter on Summery and Arbitrary Executions to Iran, Mr. Philip Alston, be expedited and include in his agenda a visit to Khuzestan- to investigate the killing of over 60 Ahwazi Arab demonstrators and the faith of the detainees and the missing including Mr. Azizi-Banitoruf.
2. To end the state of siege and redeploy military and security forces out of the province.
3. Investigates the authenticity of the government directed ethnic cleansing policy against indigenous Ahwazi Arabs as stipulated in the recently leaked internal top-secret document from President Khatemi’s office.
4. That the Islamic Republic of Iran allocates a portion of the oil money to alleviate extreme poverty among the indigenous Ahwazi Arabs.
5. Free all the indigenous detainees arrested during and after the April 15 peaceful demonstration including Mr. Youssef Azizi-Banitoruf.

Thank you.

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