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International Liberty Association Newsletter

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EDITORIAL

While preparing this newsletter, the aptly named "Beast from the East" roared over Britain burying it under ice and snow. But now, as we go to print, the snow has gone and, while occasional icy blasts continue to try to unnerve us, we know this dominion of Winter cannot long continue. The inevitable approach of Spring is all around, as the days grow longer, the sun shines warmer and the early flowers push through the germinating darkness of the soil to fill the world again with colour and movement.

Welcome Spring!!

Turning towards Iran, we see the symbolism of harsh Winter yielding inevitably to Spring very much reflected in recent events as the youthful population of Iran becomes increasingly restless and defiant, courageously determined to break through the Mullah's cold, dark world and demand their right to the pursuit of happiness, with colour, music, dance... and they will not be thwarted, as exemplified by the women who have systematically defied dress restrictions imposed on them, undeterred from expressing their desire for change by the threats and reality of long prison terms from a tyrannical regime that knows no other way but brutal repression.

This issue of the newsletter focuses on the two major occasions, International Women's Day and NoRuz, the Persian New Year, which occur annually in March and pose huge challenges for Iran's theocratic regime, based as it is on misogyny and the denial of ancient traditions.

NoRuz, Easter and Passover all fall in the beginning of Spring and it is said the forces of evil will be overcome by the forces of good when the good come together and hold hands. So let us all hold hands and say loudly, "NoRuz Mubarak! Happy Easter! Chag Sameach" and envision the momentum for change.

ON THE OCCASION OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY WOMEN ARE THE FORCE FOR CHANGE IN IRAN



Women are indeed the force for change in Iran, reflecting the extent by which they have borne the brunt of the repression by the Mullahs' regime throughout the last 39 years.

Contrary to the regime's wishes and expectations, gender discrimination and gender segregation, with its many insufferable restrictions on the female population of Iran, have not brought women to submission but made them stronger and more resilient in resisting their oppressors.

This resistance has been increasingly visible over the past year and most conspicuously during the recent December/January uprisings, where women have been seen at the forefront of many of the protests.

The resilience of the women of Iran has been honed by a system that discriminates against them in almost every area of life.

In education, poverty makes girls the primary victims, as tens of

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NORUZ, THE UNDYING TRADITION



The traditions and culture of any country are essential elements of its history that bind the peoples of the nation together. Brutal dictators and other violent extremist groups seeking to control the people, such

as the Iranian regime, ISIS and the Taliban, aim to destroy these bonds by suppressing the traditions and preventing people from observing them. But the Iranian people, in the

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Women are the force for change

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thousands of them drop out of school at a young age.

For those who make it to college, women are banned from over 80 fields of study and many universities have set quotas for female admissions. However, despite these obstacles, Iranian women have made up over 50 percent university admissions every year for the past 15 years.

In the sporting arena also, women face severe institutionalised restrictions, including receiving no government support. Women who want to take part in international tournaments have to pay for their own equipment, practice time, travel, etc. But Iranian women are so motivated that they continue to be active in sports and win medals.

Despite a ban by the Supreme leader on cycling in public, Iranian women not only continue to cycle on the streets, but buy their own bikes to participate in Asian games.

They are also among the best football players in Asia, despite having no decent pitches and nobody being allowed to watch them play.

Barred from entering any stadiums

as spectators, the women defy the Mullahs and gain admission by wearing men's clothes.

In music too, women have been persevering in increasing numbers, although they have long been banned from performing in public, or singing solo. Musical concerts are often cancelled due to the discovery of female members in the band or orchestra.

As for the compulsory veil, they have frustrated the regime to the extent that officials admit to having failed to impose the Hijab. For at least a decade, women have been defying vice and guidance patrols and flouting the regime's dress-code, while accepting the price for making their statement.

Hassan Rouhani did not include a single woman in his cabinet despite promises to do so to attract votes before the 'election'. That he could not afford even one cosmetic gesture shows the regime's vulnerability on the issue of women.

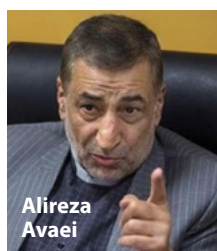
Despite zero participation in political leadership and decision-making, women are present in front lines during the uprisings and protests to help shape their own destiny.

Female political prisoners sent messages of support to protesters from behind bars, encouraging and urging them to take the risks and pay the price of freedom.

Also standing as role models are the Ashrafi women who defied the mullahs' oppression and stood firm for their rights and paid the price. It seems inevitable that the courage and perseverance of all the women of Iran will be soon rewarded with the freedom and equality they deserve.



PRESENCE OF A MASS MURDERER IN THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL IN GENEVA WIDELY CONDEMNED



Alireza Avaei, Iran's minister of justice and a member of the death committees who orchestrated the mass

murder of over 30,000 political prisoners in the summer of 1988, addressed the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva on 27 February. He is under an EU-wide ban for being "responsible for human rights violations, arbitrary arrests, denials of prisoners' rights and an increase in executions". His presence in Geneva was widely criticised and MEP Gérard Deprez, Chair of the Friends of a Free Iran group in the European parliament stressed: "Inviting Alireza Avaei to speak at the UN Human Rights Council is a total disgrace and a mockery of our democratic values.

It is an insult to the many victims of human rights violations in Iran. Avaei should instead be brought before an international tribunal to answer for the crimes that he has been involved with in the past three decades."

The US Mission in the UN said: "The United States is appalled to learn that the government of Iran is sending its Justice Minister, Seyyed Alireza Avaei, to address the UN Human Rights Council. Minister Avaei oversaw the summary executions of Iranians in the late 1980s. As the recent head of the Tehran judiciary and current Minister of Justice, Avaei oversees systematic arbitrary arrests and detentions of Iranians engaging in peaceful political and civic activism, and imprisons them in a network of facilities notorious for suspicious deaths, the use of torture, and denial of medical care."

And Lord David Alton on behalf of

The British Committee for Iran Freedom said: The Committee "is shocked over the reports of Iranian Justice Minister Alireza Avaei's plan to visit the United Nations headquarters in Geneva to address the UN Human Rights Council next week.

"The decision to invite the Iranian Justice Minister to address the UN Human Rights Council is an insult to the regime's victims, their families and Iranian activists, like Ms Maryam Akbari Monfared, who are being persecuted, intimidated and detained because they are demanding justice."





CIVIL SOCIETY URGES UN TO LAUNCH INQUIRY INTO IRAN'S 1988 MASSACRE

THE FATE OF DETAINED PROTESTERS OF THE RECENT UPRISING IS DEPENDENT ON IT



On 1 February 2018, a civil society hearing in Geneva heard witnesses and legal experts and offered an adjudication of the 1988 massacre of political prisoners in Iran. The hearing was the first of its kind by NGOs in Geneva and it urged immediate action by the UN to address the current wave of mass arrests and killings in Iranian jails following the recent anti-government protests.

International civil society and NGOs urged the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to establish a commission of inquiry to investigate the months-long massacre during which the government of Iran executed an estimated 30,000 political prisoners.

During the Geneva hearing, former UN judges, senior human rights officials and human rights experts and advocates stressed that such an inquiry, long overdue, is now especially crucial in light of the arrest of thousands of peaceful anti-government protesters at the turn of the year, after which numerous protesters died while in custody.

Participants in the hearing expressed consensus that the 1988 massacre clearly constitutes a crime against humanity. They stressed that the international community and in particular the UN are obliged to take all necessary measures to end impunity in this case and they warned that failure to hold Tehran accountable has simply emboldened the ruling theocracy to continue its gross human rights violations.

Many of the leading perpetrators of the 1988 massacre continue to hold

positions of prominence in Iranian politics and law.

The indictment was presented by the distinguished British lawyer, Kirsty Brimelow QC, the Chairwoman of the BAR Human Rights Committee. She presented ample evidence establishing that the 1988 massacre constitutes a crime against humanity and, referring to the current situation in Iran, particularly the recent mass arrest and killing of protesters in custody, concluded that the crime against humanity in Iran perpetrated by the same officials continues today.

The day-long event organised by Justice for Victims of the 1988 Massacre in Iran (JVMI), was sponsored by four NGOs with Consultative Status at the UN.



Prof Jean Ziegler, vice president of the Advisory Committee to the United Nations Human Rights Council, said it is high time for the UN to end the impunity for the perpetrators of the 1988 massacre.

Dr Juan Garcés, Chief Lawyer in the Spanish case against General Pinochet, explained that under international law these crimes must be investigated.

Tahar Boumedra, a former UN Human Rights official who has written two books on the 1988 massacre,

provided a full picture of the massacre as well as the failure of the UN to take appropriate action. He called on the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to launch a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the crime.

Eric Sottas, former Secretary-General of the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT), also spoke about the need for the international community to investigate the crimes committed in 1988 in Iran.

The audience also heard oral testimonies from survivors and eye-witnesses to the massacre. Mostafa Naderi, who was incarcerated from 1981 to 1992 and miraculously survived the 1988 massacre recounted the 11 years he spent in prison, including five in solitary confinement.

The presiding panel of adjudicators included Geoffrey Robertson QC, head of Doughty Street Chambers in the UK and former appeal judge at the UN Special Court for Sierra Leone, and Prof Eric David, Professor emeritus of international law at the Université libre de Bruxelles. The adjudicators of the civil society hearing presented their concluding remarks at the final session of the day. Both of them, based on the evidence provided, concluded that the UN has an obligation to investigate the 1988 massacre in Iran.

A report by UN Secretary General António Guterres to the General Assembly about the "Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran", dated 31 October 2017, stated: "The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) continued to receive a large number of complaints from families of the victims of executions which took place in 1988. In a joint statement issued in March, twenty human rights organizations called on the authorities to stop the harassment, intimidation and prosecution of human rights defenders seeking truth and justice on behalf of individuals who were summarily executed or forcibly disappeared during the 1980s and of their families."



NoRuz, the undying tradition *continued from p.1*

forefront of attack by these destructive forces, work hard to preserve and safeguard their ancient traditions, for their own sake and as an effective means of confronting bigotry and dictatorship. It is heartwarming that their efforts over the past four decades are now being echoed in the international arena as others around the world share in the celebration.

NoRuz, the traditional Persian spring festival, is one of the main events now celebrated the world over. Central to the festivities is the Persian New Year which occurs at the exact moment of the vernal equinox, this year at 16:15 on 20th March, but there are other traditional events that take place around this as the people celebrate the end of winter and start of spring and wish for greenness and prosperity, as they have for over 3,000 years.

NoRuz is considered a cultural legacy of ancient Persia and although its celebration has been condemned by the 'Islamic' regime that took control of Iran in 1979, the people have never let go of their heritage. It was also banned in Persian speaking regions of the former Soviet Union, as well as by the Taliban in Afghanistan, but there too the people never surrendered to the pressures and deliberately celebrated NoRuz in elaborate fashion year after year.

Beside Iran, NoRuz is traditionally celebrated in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, India, Pakistan as well as parts of Russia, Albania, and even China. With the mass exodus of Iranian refugees to countries across the world since the early 1980s, it is safe to assert that NoRuz has become a universal celebration, with a common sequence of events starting with spring cleaning and planting seeds to grow green for the Haft Seen (seven S's) table and ending with an outdoor event, Sizde-be-dar, which symbolises averting bad fortune.

Spring or House Cleaning (khane takani)



People start getting ready for NoRuz about three weeks before the vernal equinox. Pretty much everyone goes into serious spring-cleaning mode, ridding their homes of any unnecessary clutter and lingering grime from the previous year so they can start the New Year afresh, purchasing new items for the house and new clothes to wear. Many go so far as to decorate anew and repaint all the paintable parts of the house.

Charshanbe Suri (Festival of Fire)



The Festival of Fire is one of the most important and popular events that prelude the new year, taking place on the eve of the last Wednesday of the year. Bonfires are set up in various public areas, in alleys, in front of homes and in parks. Chahar-Shanbeh means Wednesday and Suri means 'Celebration'. Bush fires symbolise burning all that was bad in the old year, like pain, unhappiness, sickness and worry, while looking forward to a new beginning. People jump over the burning cinders and shout, "Oh, Chahrshanbe Suri; Give me your red colour (a red face is the symbol of healthiness) and take my sickly pallor," which is like a purification ritual. Some believe their ancestors' spirits visit during the last few days of the year. Chaharshanbe Suri is the symbol of good health, cultivation, light, and purity to the Iranians.

The mullah's regime in Iran severely restricts the traditions and customs of the people on the pretext of religion, but despite all the prohibitions and limitations, the Festival of fire is celebrated in different parts of Iran, more extensively every passing year. The Kurdish people also light bonfires and keep them lit till dawn, symbolising the victory of light over darkness.

As part of the souri, children—sometimes accompanied by adults—visit their neighbour's houses in disguise, usually something like a veil (chador) covering their entire body. Each member of the party carries an empty metal bowl and a metal spoon. At the neighbour's door, they create a chorus by banging the spoons on the bowl and on the door. The neighbour opens the door and places a treat in each visitor's bowl. The party then proceeds to the next house.





Haft Seen (seven S)



The number “seven” was sacred in ancient Persia. Beliefs such as that the sky, earth and other planets were assembled in seven levels, seven planets, seven days of the week,...were common among people. The ancient people decorated their homes with candles and kept them on for the entire first month of the year, the month of Farvardin. They burned incense and spread a table cloth that contained seven items starting with the Persian letter “seen” or “s”. Each of these seven items signifies a certain meaning. These items include:

“**Sabzeh**”, or sprouted wheat grass, which is a sign of renewal of life;

“**Serkeh**”, vinegar that symbolizes age, patience, and the toleration of hardships;

“**Samanu**”, a sweet paste made of wheat and sugar that

represents fertility and the sweetness of life;

“**Seeb**”, or red apple, which stands for health and beauty;

“**Seer**”, or garlic, which indicates medicine for good health and wellbeing;

“**Sumaq**”, or sumac, the crushed spices of berries, which symbolizes sunrise and the warmth of life;

“**Senjed**”, or silver berry, the sweet, dry fruit of the lotus tree, which denotes love and affection;

“**Sekkeh**”, coins that herald wealth and affluence.

The majority of Iranian families actually put more than seven items on their “Haft-Seen” tables, including coloured eggs and a bowl of goldfish, considering these two elements as signs of fertility, welfare, and happiness.

Despite disapproval and pressure from the regime to desist, prisoners in Iran’s jails make it their mission to celebrate NoRuz, no matter in how simple and symbolic a manner. By doing so, they demonstrate their resistance to their sentences and conditions, as well as the tradition of the victory of light over darkness.

The prisoners families celebrate NoRuz across from the prisons where their loved ones are incarcerated, while those whose loved ones have been executed by the regime, celebrate in the cemeteries where they are buried.

But the basis of the NoRuz celebration is happiness, singing, dancing and togetherness. People try to put their grievances aside and strengthen their friendships. Many reach out to those in need and provide them with the necessities of life, hoping to include them in the joy of NoRuz.

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IRANIAN WOMEN PROTESTING FORCED VEILING FACE LONG PRISON TERM



A warning by the Iranian police that women could be jailed for up to a decade for joining protests against compulsory veiling has put dozens at immediate risk of unjust imprisonment and represents an alarming escalation of the authorities’ violent crackdown on women’s rights, said Amnesty International in a statement issued on 26 February 2018.

According to the AI statement

more than 35 women have been violently attacked and arrested in Tehran alone since December 2017 for taking part in ongoing peaceful protests against the discriminatory and abusive practice of compulsory veiling. In an official statement on 23 February, the police warned that women would now be charged with “inciting corruption and prostitution,” which carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison. One of the protesters, Narges Hosseini, was put on trial before an Ershad (Moral Guidance) court in Tehran on charges that include this new charge.

“This is a deeply retrograde move by the Iranian authorities in their ongoing persecution of women who dare to speak out against compulsory veiling. It places many women at serious and immediate risk of unjust imprisonment while sending a chilling message to others to keep quiet while their rights are being violated,” said Magdalena Mughrabi, Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty

International.

“In compelling women and girls to cover their hair, the Iranian authorities have violated women’s human rights in Iran for decades and also deeply hurt women’s dignity. Rather than threatening women with jail terms for claiming their human rights, the authorities should immediately abolish the discriminatory, abusive and degrading laws and practices of compulsory veiling.”

Iran’s judiciary spokesman Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje’i has said that the women protesting against compulsory veiling are “acting under the influence of “synthetic drugs” or receiving instruction from “organized criminal groups”.

“The Iranian authorities must hold law enforcement officials to account for human rights violations, including torture and other ill-treatment and refrain from making any statements that incite further violence and abuse,” said Magdalena Mughrabi of Amnesty International.



OUR EVENTS IN CAMBRIDGE AND OXFORD

In February ILA held two events, on the 17th in Cambridge and the 24th in Oxford. The keynote speaker in Cambridge was Dr Jocelynne Scutt, Barrister and Human Rights lawyer and Cambridgeshire County Councillor who also teaches law at the University of Buckingham. In her very eloquent speech, after giving a brief history of the Iranian people's struggle for human rights and justice, she said: "The actions we should take include lobbying our government to speak up at the United Nations, to demand that the United Nations takes action. We must support the proposition that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights should institute a major public inquiry, an investigation into the human rights abuses occurring in the wake of the 1988 uprising, the 1988 Massacre." She concluded her speech by saying that: "We stand here today to demand a true, just and peaceful future for Iran and all the Iranian people. Let our actions speak loudly. Let our voices be heard."

Mrs Jill Young and Dr Gillian Rogers also spoke in Cambridge on behalf of the academic community.

In Oxford the keynote speaker was Mr Parviz Khazai, the representative of the NCRI, Iran's parliament in exile, to the Scandinavian countries. A video of the civil society hearing in Geneva on 1 February 2018 was shown at both events. The Geneva hearing was organised by the JVTI (Justice for Victims of the 1988 Massacre in Iran) where international expert lawyers heard first hand witnesses tell their accounts of the events in 1988 and then expressed their opinions.

As the photos on this page show, those who attended the Cambridge and Oxford events were also informed by an exhibition about the recent uprisings in Iran and uplifted by Iranian and British musical performances.





NEWS IN BRIEF

GERMANY CONDEMNED IRAN'S EXECUTION OF JUVENILE



The German government's human rights office called the execution of young offender, Ali Kazemi, "unacceptable" and a "violation of international treaties."

Barbel Kofler, chair of Germany's Human Rights Office, said "the policy of execution should be stopped" in Iran.

Ali Kazemi, who was accused of killing another person during a group fight when he was 15, served nearly 7 years in prison before he was executed at the age of 22 on 31 January 2018, in Bushehr.

Barbel Kofler has also called on the Iranian regime to stop the execution of another 27-year-old, Hamid Ahmadi, who has been sentenced to death for a crime he is alleged to have committed when he was 17. Ms Kofler has emphasised that there are "serious doubts" about compliance with the law in Hamid Ahmadi's trial.

NATIONWIDE PROTESTS, THIS TIME DERVISHES



Around 300 people were arrested in clashes between police and the Dervish community in Tehran.

According to reports, several of the detained Dervishes have been beaten and wounded by the police.

Javad Karimi Qodousi, a member of the National Security and Foreign Policy Commission of the Iranian regime's parliament, noted that in recent events "300 members and 95 percent of the Dervish leaders have been arrested."

PLUNDERED PEOPLE STAGE PROTEST ACROSS FROM MAJLIS



Protesters cheated by the financial institutions Alborz-e Iranian and Caspian, including a large number of women, staged a protest outside the Majlis, the mullahs' parliament, on Sunday, 25 February.

They wanted their money back and protested about official indifference in response to their requests.

The protesters chanted slogans accusing the Alborz and Caspian institutions of theft and injustice.

PROMOTING UNVEILING IS PUNISHABLE BY UP TO 10 YEARS IN JAIL

The State Security Force (SSF) has announced that "According to paragraph 2 of Article 639, encouraging people to shun the veil is punishable by one to 10-year prison sentence. This sentence cannot be transformed to other forms of punishment."

The SSF are threatening the women who stage public protests against forced veiling. The SSF added, "This is a case of obvious crime and the police are obliged to deal with it, just as breaking the law requires police intervention all over the world. If the State Security Force does not counter obvious crimes, it has committed a crime and violated the law itself and shall be prosecuted." (The state-run ILNA news agency - 23 February 2018)

THE LIVES OF TWO POLITICAL PRISONERS ARE AT RISK



Golrokh Iraee, a political prisoner exiled to Qarechak prison in Varamin, is in a critical condition in her third week of hunger strike. Ms. Iraee was transferred with Ms. Atena Daemi from Evin to Qarechak prison for supporting the uprising in January. In Qarechak prisoners are deprived of even the minimum facilities and are at risk of developing hepatitis and other illnesses due to the over-crowding of the prison with ordinary criminals and those infected with contagious diseases.

Another political prisoner, Sohail Arabi, who was exiled to Tehran's Great Prison, is also in a serious condition after 29 days of hunger strike. Head henchman Haji Moradi, the so-called prison warden, has said with great callousness that even if Sohail Arabi dies, he would not be sent to the hospital.

STRIKE OF AHVAZ STEEL WORKERS ENTERS ITS SECOND WEEK



A strike by workers of the Ahvaz Steel National Group continued into its seventh consecutive day on Monday February 26. Those who gathered in front of the governorate in the past three days chanted: "I don't go from here, until I get my right".



NoRuz, the undying tradition *continued from p.5*

Sizdeh-be-dar (Thirteen outdoors)

This is the outdoor picnic on the 13th day of Farvardin, the first month of the Persian calendar. According to the ancient belief of the Persians, 13 is an inauspicious number which explains why, on the 13th of Farvardin, Iranian families gather in parks, gardens, farms, and other green places to eat foods containing special local herbs and to have friendly conversations. They throw the sprouted wheat grass from the Haft Seen tables into rivers believing that by leaving the “Sabzeh” in the waterways they throw away the misfortune associated with the number 13 and the 13th of the year, so hoping to prevent hardships and calamities from coming into their life in the New Year. They think that the Sabzeh that is pitched into the rivers will take the bad luck away with it to a new destination. Despite the Iranian regime’s obstacles and prohibitions, people celebrate Sizdeh-be-dar with great enthusiasm.



Hello, my name is Taher. I am one of the ex-residents of Camp Ashraf in Iraq, now residing in Albania. I am thankful to you for all of your efforts. I would like to offer my Persian New Year greetings to you, wishing you health and happiness. The modern history of Iran never forgets you.

JOIN US FOR NORUZ CELEBRATION IN HAMMERSMITH TOWN HALL, LONDON W6 9LE

SATURDAY 21 APRIL 2018 FROM 4.30PM TO 8.30PM



To book your place, contact info@iliberty.org.uk or call (020) 8452 3481 Entrance £10