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IRAN

Eight Years of Death Threats

Salman Rushdie

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On 14 February 1989 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the then Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, issued a *fatwa* (religious decree) declaring that the British author, Salman Rushdie, should be executed for having insulted Islam in his novel "The Satanic Verses" published in late 1988. Since then, fearing for his life, the author has been living under constant police protection, and all his public appearances are undertaken amid tight security. The existence of the *fatwa* amounts to a threat of arbitrary deprivation of life and a violation of Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a state party.

While Amnesty International is not aware of any direct attempt by agents of the Iranian Government to kill Salman Rushdie, it is seriously concerned at the continuing calls for his death by prominent individuals and institutions in Iran, which the Iranian Government appears unwilling to condemn publicly.

In April 1995, the 15 Foreign Ministers of the European Union agreed a concerted attempt to open negotiations with the Iranian authorities in order to secure a declaration from the Iranian Government condemning terrorism and guaranteeing not to take any action "aimed at the assassination of Rushdie". In the course of these negotiations several high-ranking members of the Iranian Government, including President Hashemi Rafsanjani, reportedly gave verbal assurances that the government would not send anyone to kill Salman Rushdie, but this has not been followed up by a written declaration as called for by the European Union. Inevitably, the lack of such a written guarantee undermines the credibility of verbal assurances. Moreover, the

provocative statements made recently by some senior members of the religious establishment, the Revolutionary Guards and the Iranian media have not helped to allay concern for the author's safety.

On 12 February 1997 the Iranian charitable foundation, 15 Khordad, reportedly announced an increase in the reward for the murder of Salman Rushdie to \$2.5 million. The head of the 15 Khordad Foundation, Ayatollah Shaikh Hassan Sanei, who is a senior member of the religious establishment and personal representative of the Leader of the Islamic Republic¹, was reported in the newspaper *Jomhuri-ye Islami* as saying that anyone who killed the "apostate" writer could claim the reward, including non-Muslims and his bodyguards. President Hashemi Rafsanjani was quick to distance himself from this position and was reported to have said that day at a press conference: "*This is a non-governmental organization and its decisions have nothing to do with the government's policies. I don't know what their motive was, but the government's policy towards the (Rushdie affair) is the same as before, and one which we have repeatedly announced*". However, the failure of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran publicly to condemn and put an end to such threats indicates official acquiescence in a threat of an extrajudicial execution.

On 13 February 1997, a statement by the Revolutionary Guards printed in the *Jomhuri-ye Islami* was reported to have said, among other things, "*Muslims of the world have always considered Salman Rushdie an apostate and shall not rest until Imam Khomeini's order is implemented*". Since the Revolutionary Guards are an official part of the state apparatus, this carries an alarming implication that the *fatwa* might be implemented by state forces. To date, there has been no condemnation of this statement from any official source.

Amnesty International first raised concerns about the case of Salman Rushdie with the Iranian authorities in February 1989 and has continued to campaign on his behalf ever since. Amnesty International wrote again to the Iranian authorities in March 1997 urging them to take prompt and effective steps to ensure that Iranian policy is not to implement the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie. The organization urged the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran to issue an unequivocal written statement condemning any such threat to the life of Salman Rushdie and pledging to undertake all necessary steps to guarantee his physical safety, including explicit assurances that any Iranian citizen or organization against whom there is evidence of planning, aiding or advocating his murder would be brought to justice. No reply was received.

Some of those associated with Salman Rushdie's work have also been the victims of arbitrary attacks. A Japanese translator of the book, Hitoshi Igarashi, and an Italian translator, Ettore Capriolo, were stabbed in their own countries in July 1991. The former died immediately and the latter suffered serious injuries. The Norwegian publisher of the book, William Nygaard, was shot at three times outside his home in Oslo in 1993, but

¹He also sits on the Assembly for Determination of Exigencies of the State, the powers of which were recently boosted by the Leader, to act as his foremost advisory body, involved in setting state policies.

survived the attempt on his life. All these cases remain unresolved, the perpetrators having escaped arrest. Eight years on, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has failed to make explicit directives that the *fatwa* should be withdrawn or not implemented, and appears to turn a blind eye to the continuing threats to Salman Rushdie's life orchestrated by powerful sectors in Iran, including the press, some senior members of the religious establishment and the Revolutionary Guards.

The Iranian authorities have rejected calls to lift the *fatwa*, claiming that the edicts of a dead religious figure cannot be altered. Notwithstanding this, under the current Iranian Constitution, the Leader's responsibilities include "defining the general policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran..." and "supervision of the proper execution of the[se] general policies...". Therefore, it is within Ayatollah Khamenei's power to ensure that the clear policy of the government is not to carry out the *fatwa* and to punish anyone who calls for its implementation, or tries to carry it out.

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva has consistently expressed concern about Salman Rushdie's case in its annual resolutions on the situation of human rights in Iran. For example, its resolution 1994/73 reaffirmed that "Governments are accountable for assassinations and attacks by their agents against persons on the territory of another State" and expressed its grave concern that "there are continuing threats to the life of Mr Salman Rushdie... as well as to individuals associated with his work, which have the support of the Islamic Republic of Iran".² In addition, the Special Representative of the UN Commission on Human Rights on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, in his report of March 1996 said that he wished "to record his own condemnation of the threat upon the life of Mr Rushdie; he shares the view of those who judge the *fatwa* and the offered reward as an incitement to murder. He does not accept the argument that, if Mr Rushdie is acknowledged to have a right of free speech in these circumstances, then so too do those who condemn him to death".³

Amnesty International regards extrajudicial executions as violations of fundamental human rights and an affront to the conscience of humanity. Such unlawful and deliberate killings, carried out by order of a government or with its complicity or acquiescence, have been condemned by the UN and prohibited in international standards. The Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions (adopted by the UN Economic and Social Council on 24 May 1989

²Most recently, the Commission's resolution 1997/54 called on the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran "to provide satisfactory written assurances that it does not support or incite threats to the life of Mr. Rushdie".

³UN document E/CN.4/1996/59, p 18.

in resolution 1989/65 and endorsed by the UN General Assembly on 15 December 1989 in resolution 44/162) state in Articles 1 and 4:

1. Governments shall prohibit by law all extra-legal, arbitrary and summary executions and shall ensure that any such executions are recognized as offences under their criminal laws, and are punishable by appropriate penalties which take into account the seriousness of such offences. ...Such executions shall not be carried out under any circumstances ... this prohibition shall prevail over decrees issued by governmental authority.

4. Effective protection through judicial or other means shall be guaranteed to individuals or groups who are in danger of extra-legal, arbitrary or summary execution

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including
those
who
receive
death
threats.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

1. Write a letter to the Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran expressing concern over the continued threat to Salman Rushdie's life and urge him to take prompt and effective steps to ensure that there is a clear Iranian policy not to implement the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie.

Address:

His Excellency Ayatollah Sayed 'Ali Khamenei
Leader of the Islamic Republic
The Presidency, Palestine Avenue, Azerbaijan Intersection, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

2. Write a letter to the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran urging him to issue an unequivocal written statement condemning any death threats to the life of Salman Rushdie and pledging to undertake all necessary steps to guarantee his physical safety, including explicit assurances that any Iranian citizen or organization against whom there is evidence of aiding or advocating his murder would be brought to justice.

Address:

His Excellency Hojjatoleslam Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani
President of the Islamic Republic
The Presidency, Palestine Avenue, Azerbaijan Intersection, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

Note: President Hashemi Rafsanjani's term of office expires in August 1997. In order to obtain the name of his successor, please contact any Amnesty International Section or the International Secretariat.

KEYWORDS

WRITERS1 / HARASSMENT1 / RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE / EXTRAJUDICIAL EXECUTION / ATTEMPTED KILLING / TRANSLATORS / PUBLISHERS / EU / UN COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS / PHOTOGRAPHS /