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Memories of a slaughter in Iran

A survivor tells of 1988 massacre in Islamic Republic Thousands of men, women, children secretly executed

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

LONDON—Payam lives alone and never talks about the past.

The 46-year-old Iranian with gentle brown eyes and a quiet smile is haunted by the smell of fear and death.

Now working as an engineer in England, he walks with special soles in his shoes because his feet have been damaged by torture.

For 16 years, he has carried unspeakable memories with him. And Payam is not his real name — he asked for an alias because he believes his life could still be in danger. In the summer of 1988, most of his school friends, as well as thousands of other men, women and children — possibly as many as 30,000 political prisoners — were secretly slaughtered in prisons across Iran.

Places like the large prayer hall in the dreaded Evin prison were turned into gallows.

Children as young as 13 were hanged six at a time.

Prisoners were loaded on forklift trucks in groups and hanged from cranes and beams in half-hourly intervals. Others were killed by firing squads.

"At midnight," Payam says, "we heard a big thump under our cell's window, then another one, and another one.

"We counted 50 thumps before we realized these were bodies being dumped into lorries.

"For two months at midnight, lorries carried people we knew and loved into mass graves."

In England, France, Germany, Australia and North America — as well as privately in Iran — survivors of the 1988 massacre and their families gather in early September to commemorate the greatest state crime in Iran's modern history.

They hold vigils, organize rallies and disseminate information on the Web — willing the world to look and listen, and at long last publicly acknowledge and condemn the mass slaughter.

The execution of such a large number of individuals within such a short time, without any due process or trial, violates many articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Iran is a signatory, as well as several other international treaties.

Yet the international community has never recognized this massacre as a crime against humanity.

Payam was sent to Evin in 1984 for his non-violent leftist political activities while a student at Teheran University. In prison, he was tortured so severely he couldn't walk for five months.

A year later, he was sentenced to 10 years for being a heretic and refusing to recant his political affiliations.

He was later transferred to Gohardasht on the outskirts of Teheran, the largest prison in Iran, where he was at the time of the massacre.

Since the Islamic Republic of Iran came to power in 1979 (and earlier under the Shah regime), Iranian prisons have been full of political opponents.

Some were members or supporters of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, an Islamic armed group fighting against the regime.

Others were part of ethnic minority groups.

And many, like Payam, were leftists, intellectuals and students — often serving long sentences for no more than distributing leaflets or having a banned book, or just being accused by "a trusted friend of the regime."

In July 1988, at the end of the devastating Iran-Iraq war, the political atmosphere in Iran was volatile: People were angry about the long war and a large number of prisoners were due to be released.

The government decided to crush all political opposition and purge its prisons of troublesome elements once and for all.

Soon after signing the ceasefire, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who'd become Supreme Leader of Iran after the 1979 revolution, issued a secret but extraordinary *fatwa* — an Islamic legal ruling — advising the execution of all Mojahedin as "fighters against God" and all leftists as "apostates from Islam."

On July 29, the executions began for the Mojahedin. A month later, it was the turn of the leftists.

"Suddenly," Payam recalls, "the guards took all newspapers and televisions away. Visits were suspended and contact with guards prohibited.

"Everybody was very quiet, trying to understand what it all meant."

Mojahedin were separated from leftists and other groups, and all prisoners were classified according to their level of resistance.

All over the country, prisoners were called in front of a "court" or "death commission" made out of an Islamic judge, a representative of the Ministry of Intelligence and a state prosecutor.

They were told they would be released, but first needed to answer a few questions, such as "Are you a Muslim?" "Do you pray?" and "Do you recant your political activities?"

"When (the prisoners) came out, some were sent to the right, others to the left," Payam says.

After a while, the prisoners realized that far from being released, those on the left were gone forever.

"We became silent. Everyone was sick with fear."

Then, it was the turn of Payam's ward.

**'They took me to the death committee
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Payam, a 1988 massacre survivor now
working as an engineer in Britain**

"They called the names of my friends. I could feel their fear. I saw the way they stood up and walked toward the door. I will never forget," he says, his voice trailing.

"They took me to the death committee three times and every time they sent me in the queue for execution. I wrote my name on my underpants so my body could be identified. I don't know why I survived."

By the end of the summer, Evin was eerily empty. In other prisons across the country, thousands were missing.

In December 1988, Amnesty International reported being "gravely concerned" by a wave of political executions in Iran:

"Those executed included political prisoners detained without trial, or serving sentences imposed after unfair trials, suspected political opponents still in prison after serving their sentences, and those rearrested after release."

Many were women and teenagers.

The U.N. Human Rights Commission received hundreds of petitions and letters from individuals around the world expressing what it described as "deep concern at the alleged wave of executions and calling for U.N. intervention to bring such executions to a halt."

The Iranian regime flatly denied the massacre, but under international pressure and to mark the 10th anniversary of the republic's foundation, released several hundred remaining political prisoners in February 1989.

For months afterward, Amnesty International and the U.N. urged Tehran to fully investigate all allegations pertaining to the massacre, release the actual number of victims and their place of burial.

Strangely, the international community didn't put more pressure on the Iranian government to do so, and to this day, survivors and families of the victims are still waiting.

"At the end of the Iran-Iraq war, there was a certain interest in the part of the major powers not to stir up the pot and antagonize Iran," explains Joe Stork, Human Rights Watch's director of the Mid-East North Africa division.

The actual number of victims is still not known, but several sources estimate it to be around 30,000.

In January 2001, Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, former designated successor to Khomeini, documented in his memoirs gruesome details about the barbaric purge.

These complemented and corroborated numerous previous reports and complaints, and proved that the orders came from the very top.

Montazeri's shocking revelations prompted renewed efforts from Iranians in exile to have those involved tried for crimes against humanity.

Many of those alleged to have been involved, including former president Hashemi Rafsanjani, are still in power, according to several sources.

"The brutal massacres of 1988 were a widespread and systematic series of summary executions, which had approval at the highest levels of the political leadership in Iran," concurs Drewery Dyke, Amnesty International's Iran researcher.

"They were what customary international law calls a 'crime against humanity' and yet, over 15 years later, nobody has been brought to justice.

"Impunity for such appalling crimes only leads to further abuses of people's fundamental human rights."

Today, prisoners are still tortured and killed in Iran.

Human Rights Watch recently published a damning report on the treatment of political prisoners and the EU has condemned human rights abuses there, too.

For Payam and other survivors, the current situation has its roots in the summer of '88.

He and many other survivors were released in February 1989. But there was no jubilation or even relief.

"We were broken," Payam says.

"How could we accept that Muslims could carry out such horrific crimes in the name of God or Islam? How could we face the bereaved families?"

Payam was released under heavy bail and with his family house pledged against his good conduct.

He was under constant surveillance, couldn't leave the country and had to report regularly to an Islamic Guards station.

In 1996, still fearing for his life, he immigrated to England, where he is now a permanent resident and was able to finally finish his engineering studies.

Sitting in his rented room in a large Victorian house, he looks at the photographs of Iran's snow-capped Mount Damavand peak hanging on his wall.

He thinks of his parents and the friends he never sees.

He dreams of his beautiful country with its high mountains, forests, rivers and deserts.

Most of the time, he prefers not to think, not to dream.

So, he keeps obsessively busy with work or goes running with special soles in his shoes.

"I cannot continue on living if I remember," he explains. "But, if I do, I want it to be useful, I need to bear witness for those who have died."

"This is my second life — a life I shouldn't have. I feel I was given this second life to tell the whole world what happened in Iran in the summer of 1988."

Veronique Mistiaen is a freelance journalist based in London.