

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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# Iran: Leaked official documents ordering deadly crackdown highlight need for international action

The Iranian authorities have mobilized their well-honed machinery of repression to ruthlessly crackdown on nationwide protests in an attempt to thwart any challenge to their power, Amnesty International said today. The organization raised fears that without concerted collective action by the international community that goes beyond statements of condemnation, countless more people risk being killed, maimed, tortured, sexually assaulted and thrown behind bars.

The protests were sparked by outrage at the death in custody of 22-year-old Mahsa (Zhin) Amini on 16 September 2022 days after being arrested by the “morality” police for not complying with the country’s discriminatory and abusive compulsory veiling laws. However, their focus quickly expanded to broader grievances against the political establishment and encompassed demands for the end of the Islamic Republic system and the establishment of a secular democratic system respecting human rights.

The Iranian authorities’ ongoing campaign to crush these protests has involved extensive deployment of riot police, Revolutionary Guards, the *Basij* paramilitary force, the Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran and plainclothes security agents. The crackdown has left dozens of men, women and children dead and hundreds more horrifically injured. Amnesty International has obtained a copy of a leaked official document which records that, on 21 September 2022, the General Headquarters of Armed Forces issued an order to the commanders of armed forces in all provinces instructing them to “severely confront” protesters who were described as “troublemakers and anti-revolutionaries”. The General Headquarters of Armed Forces is the top entity in Iran coordinating and overseeing the conduct of armed and paramilitary forces, as well as law enforcement agencies including the police. The leaked order explains the reasons behind a significant escalation in the use of live ammunition against protesters across the country, leading to dozens of deaths in the evening of 21 September alone (see below for more details).

Amnesty International has also obtained another leaked document which records that, on 23 September, the commander of armed forces in Mazandaran province ordered security forces stationed in central areas to “confront mercilessly and while going as far as causing deaths any unrest by rioters and anti-Revolutionaries.”

Evidence collected by Amnesty International on widespread use of lethal force against protesters raises serious concerns that the security forces either intended to kill protesters or knew with a sufficient degree of certainty that death would be the necessary consequence of their use of firearms in the circumstances concerned, yet persisted with their conduct. In either case, under international law, the killings resulting from such unlawful use of firearms are considered not accidental, but deliberate, and constitute extrajudicial executions.

This latest round of bloodshed seen in the context of protests in Iran is rooted in a deep and longstanding crisis of systemic impunity that has long prevailed in Iran for the most serious crimes under international. The authorities have consistently failed to abide by their obligations under international law to ensure effective, impartial and independent investigations into extrajudicial executions and other unlawful killings and bring those reasonably suspected of criminal responsibility to justice in fair trials without recourse to the death penalty.

The Iranian authorities have repeatedly ignored the calls of the UN Secretary General, multiple UN Special Procedures and the UN General Assembly to cease the unlawful use of force, including lethal force, against protesters and bystanders. Calls on the Iranian authorities to effectively investigate and prosecute those responsible for unlawful killings and torture and other ill-treatment of protesters and of people deprived of their liberty have also been ignored.

It is high time for UN member states to hear the cries of victims and human rights defenders in Iran for meaningful action. This demand for international support is well illustrated by the statement of a protester from Esfahan who said to Amnesty International: “Please be our voice... We are standing firm in the streets. We are risking our lives on the street [protesting], please please stand up for us.”

Amnesty International renews its calls on member states engaging at the UN Human Rights Council to urgently support the establishment of an international investigative and accountability mechanism to collect, consolidate, preserve, and analyze

evidence of the most serious crimes under international law committed in Iran and assist in the investigation and prosecution of those suspected of criminal responsibility. In addition to facilitating access to justice, support for such a mechanism would have a meaningful deterrent effect by sending a clear signal to the Iranian authorities that such acts will not go uninvestigated and unpunished. Amnesty International also renews its calls for all states to exercise universal jurisdiction to criminally investigate and prosecute Iranian officials suspected of criminal responsibility for crimes under international law.

## METHODOLOGY

As part of its ongoing investigation into the most recent crackdown on protests, Amnesty International gathered testimonies from protesters, other eyewitnesses, relatives of victims and other affected individuals as well as human rights defenders and journalists inside Iran. Sources outside Iran also shared with Amnesty International information they had received from primary sources in Iran, including written and audio-recorded eyewitness accounts. The organization also reviewed audiovisual evidence, death and burial certificates noting forensic cause of death as well as official statements, leaked official documents and state media reports.

The number of deaths recorded by Amnesty International concern only victims whose names and pictures have been identified. For some victims, Amnesty International obtained information from primary sources impacted by the deaths, including relatives, neighbours, friends, acquaintances, and eyewitnesses. For others, it documented the deaths based on information received from human rights activists and journalists. In order to ascertain the credibility of the information received from human rights activists and journalists, Amnesty International interviewed them about their sources of information, which typically included relatives, neighbours, friends, acquaintances and eyewitnesses. For each victim, Amnesty International conducted internet searches and, where it was able to locate media articles or social media posts on them, compared the information available online with the information received directly from primary or secondary sources. As part of its process of crosschecking and corroboration, Amnesty International obtained the funeral posters of most victims and also reviewed, in some cases, pictures or videos showing the bodies of the deceased.

## A WEEK OF UNLAWFUL KILLINGS

Amnesty International has so far recorded the names of 52 people killed by Iran's security forces since the eruption of nationwide protests in Iran on 16 September 2022. Among the recorded victims are five women, one girl, and five boys. The organization believes the real death toll, including the number of children killed, is higher and it is continuing its investigations to identify victims.

The 52 recorded deaths cover a seven-day period from Monday 19 September to Sunday 25 September. Killings generally took place during evening/nighttime protests. According to information gathered by Amnesty International, of these recorded victims, most were killed by security forces firing live ammunition. Amnesty International has reviewed photos and videos showing deceased victims with horrifying gunshot wounds in their heads, chests and stomachs. At least three men and two women were killed due to security forces firing metal pellets, including birdshot, at close range. A 16-year-old girl is recorded as having died from fatal beatings with batons to her head (see below for more details on her case).

During the first two nights of the deadly week, the killings were concentrated in the provinces of Kurdistan, Kermanshah, and West Azerbaijan, which are heavily populated by the Kurdish minority to which Mahsa Amini belonged. Amnesty International has so far recorded the names of nine victims who died due to fatal injuries sustained during the protests of these two nights. Among them is **Farjad Darvishi** who was killed by security forces in Urumieh, West Azerbaijan province, on 20 September. An eyewitness told Amnesty International that riot police fired birdshot at Farjad Darvishi from a distance of about four or five meters and that after he fell to the ground, several security officials kicked and severely beat him with batons until he died.

**Reza Shahparnia** is another victim who died due to security forces firing metal pellets at him in Kermanshah, Kermanshah province, on 20 September, according to an eyewitness interviewed by Amnesty International. This is consistent with Reza Shahparnia's burial certificate, which has been reviewed by Amnesty International and states that he sustained heavy bleeding and injuries in his chest, stomach, lungs, heart and liver as a result of being hit by metal pellets.

On the night of 21 September, as protests grew larger across the country and after the General Headquarters of Armed Forces ordered armed forces to "severely confront" protesters, security forces intensified their use of firearms, including live ammunition that resulted in the death of dozens of protesters and bystanders.

Amnesty International has to date recorded the names of 34 men, women and children killed by security forces during the deadly night of 21 September in 19 cities in the provinces of Alborz, Gilan, Ilam, Kermanshah, Mazandaran, Semnan, Tehran, and West Azerbaijan.

Information received by the organization from local residents, medical staff, and journalists with contacts on the ground suggests that the number of those killed on the night of 21 September is higher, but the identities of some victims remain unknown, due to both the authorities' ongoing disruption of the internet and their systemic harassment and intimidation of families of those killed to stay silent.

For the nights of 22 September to 25 September, Amnesty International has recorded the names of eight victims including at least two children killed by security forces in the provinces of Alborz, Esfahan, Kohgiluyeh and Bouyer Ahmadmad, Ghazvin and Tehran provinces.

According to information received from a primary source in Iran, a 16-year-old girl **Sarina Esmailzadeh** was killed during the protests in Gohardasht, Alborz province, on 23 September after security forces struck her head with batons. According to the same source, security and intelligence agents have subjected the girl's family to intense harassment to coerce them into silence.

Amnesty International recorded the unlawful killing of another child, 16-year-old **Pedram Azarnoush**, a bystander who was shot dead in Kohgiluyeh and Bouyer Ahmadmad province on 22 September after Revolutionary Guard agents randomly fired live ammunition repeatedly to disperse protesters. An eyewitness told Amnesty International: *"The young boy was leaning on a wall and he was only looking at people. The protesters were fleeing, and he did not realize that bullets could come in his direction as well ... The security forces were repeatedly firing their weapons in all directions, and everyone was at risk of being shot or not, it was sheer luck whether they [escaped] being hit by a bullet or not."*

Other victims include **Javad Heidary**, who died on 22 September after security forces shot him from his back with live ammunition in Ghazvin, Ghazvin province. His family understands from information informally received from low-ranking government officials that security forces blocked his immediate transfer to a hospital while he was bleeding.

This is consistent with information received by Amnesty International from an eyewitness in Ghazvin who described seeing security forces blocking the transfer of a young man who had been shot on the night of 22 September. At the time of publication, it was not possible to establish if the victim seen by this eyewitness was Javad Heidary or another person. The eyewitness told Amnesty International: *"A large number of plainclothes officials had gathered around the individual. They did not allow people to stop by and attacked anyone who tried to do so with stun weapons...I am outraged that they just left the boy to die. If they had allowed someone to come [to his aid], the boy may have survived."*

Of the victims recorded to date, one, **Mohammad Jameh Bozorg**, aged 60, was killed at his home during a police raid operation. The victim's cousin living outside Iran told Amnesty International that according to information received from his family in Iran, *Basiji* agents raided Mohammad Jame Bozorg's home in Karaj around 3am on 24 September to arrest his son, Meysam Jameh Bozorg, for his participation in the protests. Mohammad Jame Bozorg attempted to stop the arrest of his son. In response, the agents fatally shot him in the face in front of his wife and his two sons. Meysam Jameh Bozorg fell from the roof of the house while attempting to escape and broke both his legs. Mohammad Jameh Bozorg's wife and their other son were arbitrarily arrested by the security forces and detained for about 24 to 48 hours.

Amnesty International has not recorded any protester or bystander deaths during the protests taking place since 26 September in various cities across the country, but has continued to document widespread patterns of unlawful use of force and firearms, including birdshot and other pellets, by security forces that have resulted in serious injuries of hundreds of protesters and bystanders.

## STATE DENIAL AND COVER-UP OF KILLINGS

In keeping with documented patterns of denial, distortion and cover-up of crimes under international law and other violations of human rights, the Iranian authorities have once again propagated well-worn false narratives about the profile of victims as a way to hide the truth that security forces unlawfully killed dozens of protesters and bystanders who were not posing any imminent threat of death or serious injury that could warrant the use of firearms.

The authorities have smeared the protesters as "rioters" and "enemies of the people". To absolve themselves of responsibility for the deaths, they have also attempted to portray protesters as responsible for most of the killings recorded in the context of the protests (see below for more details).

On 23 September 2022, Iran's Minister of Interior Ahmad Vahidi made statements defining four categories of people killed during the protests. He said the first category were "people from the west and northwest of Iran where anti-Revolutionary groups are active". He did not clarify the causes and circumstances surrounding these killings. Provinces in the west and northwest of Iran are populated by oppressed Kurdish and Azerbaijani Turkic minorities.

The Minister of Interior described the other three categories as “innocent people who were beaten by rioters and sometimes killed by them”; “those who may have been killed while trying to enter sensitive places such as police stations and governor buildings”; and “people who were killed in other places and whose bodies were transferred to protest sites”. With respect to the last category, the Minister has claimed without providing additional details or evidence that there are many examples of such incidents to “provoke public opinion and to keep the protests active”. He stated that some of those whose bodies had been brought to protest sites had been killed by private individuals “settling personal disputes”.

## OFFICIAL CLAIMS OF CASUALTIES AMONG SECURITY FORCES

While denying responsibility for killings, the authorities have suggested that the use of firearms was justified given, what they described to be, a violent and dangerous situation, as demonstrated by the death of 11 security officials or *Basiji* agents between 21 and 24 September at the hands of protesters. However, information obtained by Amnesty International from independent sources exposes inaccuracies in the official narrative in four of these cases.

For instance, eyewitnesses, local residents, and journalists told Amnesty International that at least one of the individuals presented by the authorities as a *Basiji* agent, **Mohammad Falah**, was a bystander or protester who was shot dead by security forces in Amol, Mazandaran province, on 21 September (see below for more details). Information obtained by the organization from an eyewitness, coupled with information circulating online, also casts doubt on the authorities’ identification of another man, **Milad Ostadhashem**, as a *Basiji* agent shot dead by protesters. An eyewitness told Amnesty International that during the protests on 25 September in the neighborhood of Haft Hoz in Tehran, he saw security forces shooting and killing a man. The reported date and location of the incident matches the details published by state media outlets for Milad Ostadhashem. This suggests that the unidentified victim reported by the eyewitness may have been Milad Ostadhashem, as only one person was reported to have been killed on 25 September in Haft Hoz. Amnesty International has also seen comments online by individuals who say they knew Milad Ostadhashem disputing that he was a member of the *Basiji*.

Eyewitnesses, local residents, and journalists on the ground further said that at least two other individuals who the authorities have claimed to be *Basiji* agents, **Abolfazl Akbari Doost** from Langeroud, Gilan province, and **Mohammad Hossein Sarvari** from Garmsar, Semnan province, were in the crowd with protesters and both were killed on 21 September by live bullets randomly fired by security forces. Amnesty International was not able to independently confirm if the deceased were protesters or plainclothes officials posing as protesters in the crowd<sup>1</sup>, but the sources interviewed by the organization said the latter option was the more likely scenario. The organization has not, therefore, included these names in its list of protesters and bystanders killed during the protests.

The other seven reported deaths that the authorities have claimed to be security officials or *Basiji* agents resulted from incidents of alleged beatings, stabbing or stone throwing, which must, as with all cases of homicide, be criminally investigated in a fair and independent manner and without relying on statements obtained through torture or other ill-treatment or without a lawyer present. Nevertheless, Amnesty International stresses that the officially reported times and locations of their deaths do not overlap with the times and locations of any incidents documented by Amnesty International where protesters and bystanders were killed.<sup>2</sup> As such, the authorities failed to present any evidence that the killing of protesters and bystanders took place in the context of responding to imminent threats of death or serious injury.

## FALSE ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR KILLINGS TO NON-STATE ACTORS

Information obtained by Amnesty International from victims’ relatives, eyewitnesses and human rights defenders indicates Iranian authorities are intimidating and harassing the families of those killed during the protests and/or promising them financial compensation in order to coerce them to video-record statements attributing responsibility of the killings of their loved-ones to “rioters” working for “enemies” of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a pattern that has been documented previously and based on eyewitness accounts and video footage of the latest protests, the pattern continues.

<sup>2</sup> According to state media reports, Hossein Taghipour from Tehran, Tehran province and Farid Karampour from Robotkarim, Tehran province, died as a result of beatings; Rasoul Din Mohammadi and Hossein Ojaghi died as a result of stabbing; and Abbas Fatemieh from Urumieh, West Azerbaijan province died as a result of stone throwing and other possible blows to his head. State media reports reviewed by Amnesty International did not identify the cause of death for the remaining men Amirreza Oladi from Shiraz, Fars province, and Moslem Javidi Mehr from Ghouchan, Khorasan-e Razavi province. For most of the men, state media reports indicate that they were killed while “on duty” to “contain”, “confront” or “disperse” protesters.

Amnesty International has so far identified several written reports or propaganda videos published by state media outlets since 21 September which feature relatives of **Mahsa Mogooee** from Esfahan, Esfahan province; **Foad Ghadimi** from Divandareh, Kurdistan province; **Reza Lotfi** from Dehgolan, Kurdistan province; **Mohammad Falah** in Amol, and teenager, **Asgar Beiglou** from Karaj, Alborz province, and attribute the death of their loved ones to persons affiliated with the protesters. The father of Mahsa Mogooee is shown saying, “My daughter was on her way home. She was not anywhere affected by the unrests. I know security forces did not kill my daughter”. The father of Foad Ghadimi is shown in a propaganda video and also quoted by state media saying, “My son was certainly killed by anti-Revolutionaries. Those affiliated with the anti-Revolutionaries fabricate deaths because they know the police and security officials do not carry firearms. They easily infiltrate among the people and murder individuals such as Foad to attribute them to the regime.” The father of Mohammad Falah is shown warning youth against participating in protests orchestrated by “enemies” and suggesting that an unidentified person recruited by such enemies shot dead his son. The relatives of Reza Lotfi are shown being visited by several officials at their home, with a voiceover saying that Reza Lotfi was “shot in suspicious circumstances”. On 29 September, the father of Reza Lotfi widely distributed a video-recorded statement, strongly rejecting the authorities’ narrative and saying that the clip in which they were featured was produced without their consent or knowledge.

The official narrative concerning the deaths of four aforementioned victims; namely, Mahsa Mogooee, Reza Lotfi, and Mohammad Falah, contradicts information received from primary sources on the ground, including eyewitnesses and victims’ friends and acquaintances, who said security forces fatally shot them. Amnesty International has not been able to obtain any information from independent sources about the causes and circumstances surrounding the death of the fifth victim, Asgar Beiglou, or his profile. Amnesty International is concerned that the statements attributed to victims’ relatives may have been extracted under duress and coercion. State media outlets in Iran have a longstanding record of producing and broadcasting, in co-operation with Iran’s intelligence and security bodies, coerced statements from families of people killed during protests and including them in propaganda videos.

As part of their efforts to cover up the unlawful killings carried out by security forces, the Iranian authorities have further presented one of the abovementioned victims, **Mohammad Falah**, as a *Basiji* agent claiming that he was shot dead by a person affiliated with the protesters while treating injured people (see above). However, Amnesty International obtained a detailed eyewitness testimony from a source with close links to security forces which casts serious doubts over the veracity of the authorities’ account. The source said Mohammad Falah was a protester or a bystander and not someone collaborating with the security forces. The source described how, on 21 September, riot police and Revolutionary Guard agents, respectively, fired birdshot and live ammunition from a distance of 10-15 meters at protesters who had gathered in front of the Office of the Governor in Amol. The source stated that as a result, **Mohammad Falah**, **Erfan Rezaee**, and **Sina Loh Mousavi**, and one woman, **Ghazaleh Chelavi** (also reported as Chelabi), were killed and several other people were injured. Human rights defenders with contacts on the ground have reported the same names. Amnesty International has obtained information indicating that intelligence and security officials have been harassing and pressuring the family of **Ghazaleh Chelavi** in Amol to issue a public statement that she was shot by a “rioter” present in the crowd.

The source with close links to security forces stressed that people participating in the protest of 21 September in Amol did not wield firearms and did not pose an imminent threat of death or serious injury to anyone around the protest when the Revolutionary Guards and police officials stationed in the Office of the Governor started firing live ammunition from around 7:30pm onwards. According to the source, the Revolutionary Guards agents approached protesters from behind and fired their weapons repeatedly and randomly, including when protesters were running away seeking safety. The source acknowledged that about an hour before the Revolutionary Guards agents used live ammunition, some physical confrontations had occurred between some protesters and security forces after they had resorted to beatings to disperse the protesters even though the protests were overwhelmingly peaceful up to that moment. The source also told Amnesty International that, during these confrontations, at least two officials who were involved in the crackdown were stabbed and some others were harmed. However, the subsequent use of firearms was not related to these incidents nor directed against those who may have still posed a threat of stabbing security officials and was instead carried out for the apparent purpose of dispersing the protests and preventing people from entering the Office of the Governor.

## **KILLED FOR ENTERING STATE BUILDINGS**

In public statements since the protests began, Iran’s Minister of Interior Ahmad Vahidi has admitted that some protesters were killed solely for attempting to forcefully enter state buildings even when they did not pose an imminent threat to life. The Minister claimed that the Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran (known by its Persian acronym Faraja) were ordered not to carry firearms with them and attempted to justify the killing of protesters trying to enter state buildings by stating that “only those [security forces] defending headquarters and sensitive places fired weapons”.

Amnesty International's research confirms that in several places where deaths were recorded, including Garmsar, Semnan province; Oshnavieh, West Azerbaijan province; the village of Balou, West Azerbaijan province; and Eslam Abad-e Gharb, Kermanshah province, some protesters attempted to forcefully enter police stations (*kalantari*), governors' offices (*farmandari*) or the headquarters of the paramilitary *Basij* force. In some cases, these attempts were accompanied by throwing stones or arson. Eyewitnesses consistently reported that security forces fired live ammunition repeatedly and randomly in response to push away and disperse protesters, displaying a callous disregard for human life. Information obtained by Amnesty International from a source with close links to security forces indicates that the use of live ammunition for preventing state buildings was pursuant to orders issued by a military body in each province called the Centre for Command and Control (*markaz-e farmandaehi va control*), which defined the protection of police bases and governor offices as a "red line".

Amnesty International stresses that international law restricts the use of firearms to instances where their use is strictly necessary in response to an imminent threat of death or serious injury, and only when less extreme means are insufficient to achieve a legitimate objective. Suppressing peaceful protests or punishing protesters for expressing their opinions are never legitimate objectives. Protesters attempting to simply enter buildings and who are not posing an imminent threat to the lives or bodily integrity of others, including members of security forces, does not justify the intentional lethal use of force.

Amnesty International reviewed corroborating videos from Garmsar, the village of Balou and Eslam Abad-e Gharb indicating that security forces continued to fire live ammunition even when protesters had already moved away from the entrance of the state buildings concerned and were protesting from a distance without posing any threat to anyone.

The circumstances of the repeated shootings raise serious concerns that the security forces either intended to cause the death of protesters or knew with a sufficient degree of certainty that death would be the necessary consequence of their use of firearms in the circumstances concerned, yet persisted with their conduct. In either case, under international law, the killings resulting from such unlawful use of firearms are considered not accidental, but deliberate, and constitute extrajudicial executions, which is a crime under international law.

## **TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT OF PROTESTERS**

Eyewitness accounts and video footage reviewed by Amnesty International show clear patterns of torture and other ill-treatment by security forces, including repeated and severe beatings of protesters and bystanders even of people who were already restrained. Beatings have been used as a tactic to punish protesters, disperse crowds and/or prevent people filming the response of the authorities. Amnesty International has documented instances of security forces delivering dangerous head and neck strikes and punching, kicking, pushing and delivering forceful blows with batons causing the victims to collapse to the ground. Amnesty International also documented sexual assaults and other forms of gender-based and sexual violence, including grabbing women's breasts and violently pulling women from their hair in reprisal for removing their headscarves.

Eyewitnesses and other informed sources told Amnesty International that those inflicting the beatings include riot police, paramilitary *Basij* agents and plainclothes officials.

An eyewitness present at the protests that took place in Sattar Khan Street in Tehran on 25 September told Amnesty International: *"The security forces did not show mercy to anyone. They fired shoguns at people and subjected people to beatings with batons, punching and kicking."*

A protester from Esfahan told Amnesty International on 28 September: *"I have seen protesters beaten. The night before, my friends recounted how they saw one woman [protester] was yanked from her hair along the ground. Her clothes were coming off her body and the security forces kept pulling her by the hair... Two nights ago, several of my friends were beaten with batons. One of them, who has now got bruises on her forearm and legs, told me that security forces cornered them in an alley and beat them with batons. One member of the security forces then said, 'let's also shoot them in the leg' and another security agent said, 'no, let's go'. They are so brutal."*

Amnesty International verified a video recorded in Shiraz, Fars province, on 24 September which shows riot police repeatedly and violently yanking the hair of one woman who had removed her headscarf as an act of protest. The video also captures how security forces sexually assault another woman who attempted to intervene by grabbing her breast, before a riot police official pushes her violently to the ground and causes her head to hit the cement curb. Amnesty International spoke to a primary source who said that the woman whose hair was pulled has been suffering from extreme pain in her head as well as emotional distress for the injuries that the woman who attempted to help her may have sustained.

Another woman described to Amnesty International how security forces physically tortured a member of her family who was present in the vicinity of the protests: *"My loved one and his friend did not realize that they were being followed. Suddenly,*

*several Revolutionary Guards agents attacked them with pepper sprays, batons and stun guns. They beat my loved one so much with batons on his head, neck and back that he fainted. When he regained consciousness, he said he saw the agents beating his friend as if they intended to kill him.”*

Amnesty International has continued to receive testimonies and audio-visual evidence indicating the extensive use of birdshot and other metal pellets by security forces firing shotguns, leading in some cases to blinding one or both eyes and other painful injuries.

A bystander told Amnesty International that on 24 September, several *Basiji* agents armed with batons and shotguns stopped him while he was passing through an area in the vicinity of protests. The agents first searched through his phone for videos and images of protests. The man said that after they found nothing, they first beat him with batons and then, as he was trying to run away while limping, they fired rubber bullets at him.

The victim described what happened next as follows: *“The Basij agents said I will let you go but you must run away and when he let me go, because of all the worry I was feeling, I walked away slowly and when I was about 1 meter or so away, they began shooting me with rubber bullets. They hit me 5 or 6 times. I continued on and about 200 meters away ... Four revolutionary Guard agents stopped me and tried to pull me away by the arm. I told them my mother is ill and I need to go home. I offered to show my ID card and that my home is close. One of them started to kick me and hit me, and said if I see you here again, I will rape you.”*

The victim shared with the organization images of his injuries which are consistent with his description of the torture.

The documented acts of torture and other ill-treatment raise concerns that hundreds of people arrested since the start of the protests risk similar treatment in custody. Amnesty International continues investigating allegations of mass arrests of protesters and bystanders, as well as journalists, political activists, lawyers and human rights defenders, including women’s rights activists and those belonging to oppressed ethnic minority groups.

## **INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW AND STANDARDS**

The use of force in the context of assemblies is governed by a number of international human rights treaties and instruments, including the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials.<sup>3</sup> Security forces must not use firearms except to defend themselves or others against an imminent threat of death or serious injury, and only when less extreme and harmful means are insufficient to protect life.<sup>4</sup> Firearms must never be used as a public order management tool for dispersing protesters.<sup>5</sup>

In any instance where police and other security forces may decide it is necessary and proportionate to use force to contain violence by protesters and secure the safety of others, they must distinguish between individuals who are engaged in violence and those who are not, carefully consider the risks of escalating an already tense situation, and carefully aim proportionate force only at those engaged in violence. Law enforcement officials must ensure that those who remain peaceful can continue protesting without undue interference and intimidation from security forces.

When using force and firearms, security forces must at all times comply with the principles of legality, necessity and proportionality which must only be used in pursuance of a legitimate aim:

- Legality means that the use of force must be governed by a law that is sufficiently clear and makes clear when the authorities will or will not use force. The use of force needs also to serve a legitimate objective. Suppressing peaceful protests or punishing people for participating in a protest are never legitimate objectives. If some protesters engage in violent actions, this does not turn an otherwise peaceful protest into a non-peaceful assembly and police should ensure those who remain peaceful can continue protesting by specifically targeting those who engage in violence.
- Necessity means using only the minimum level of force strictly needed to achieve a legitimate objective. To comply with the principle of necessity, authorities must attempt to use non-violent means first, whenever this is feasible,

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<sup>3</sup> UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, adopted on 7 September 1990 (hereafter UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force). See also Amnesty International, *Use of Force: Guidelines for the implementation of the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials*, August 2015, [amnesty.org.uk/files/use\\_of\\_force.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/use_of_force.pdf) (hereafter Use of Force Guidelines)

<sup>4</sup> UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force, Principle 9 (previously cited).

<sup>5</sup> Amnesty International, *Use of Force Guidelines*, Guideline 7.4.3, p. 159 (previously cited).

and no greater force should be used than what is necessary to achieve the objective. Security forces must never use force for the purpose of punishment.

- Proportionality means that law enforcement objectives, even if legitimate, cannot be achieved at any cost. Any harm law enforcement officials might cause must not outweigh the harm they want to legitimately prevent. The type, period and level of force used to pursue a legitimate objective and the potential injury or pain that may arise from it must be proportionate to the threat posed by an individual or group of individuals.

Birdshot, by nature, does not allow for such a differentiated response in full respect of the principles of necessity and proportionality. It is inherently inaccurate, carries a great risk of causing significant injury including to persons other than the targeted persons, and causes a level of widespread harm, which would be in all circumstances excessive and disproportionate to the legitimate objective pursued by the authorities. Amnesty International considers that the security forces' use of birdshot violates the absolute prohibition on torture and other ill-treatment given the serious harm to physical integrity and the mental trauma that this conduct causes to protesters and the fact that it is deployed for the purpose of inflicting severe harm and suffering on protesters to intimidate and punish them and to crush protests.

Tear gas and water cannon by their very nature have a high probability of affecting not only those individuals who are engaged in violence, but also bystanders and peaceful demonstrators. They may therefore only be used for dispersal if violence has become widespread and so reached such a scale that security forces cannot contain the threat by targeted means which can directly affect the violent individuals only.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International, Chemical irritants in law enforcement: An Amnesty International position paper, June 2021, 4.1, p. 9.