The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) is an international, nonviolent, and democratic membership organisation. Its members are indigenous peoples, minorities, and unrecognised or occupied territories that have joined together to protect and promote their human and cultural rights, to preserve their environments, and to find nonviolent solutions to conflicts which affect them.

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I. Introduction

1. This report is submitted by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) on the occasion of the mid-term reporting session between the second and third Universal Periodic Review of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This report draws attention to the ongoing human rights violations that affect the country’s ethnic minorities.

2. Environmental issues in Iran are inherently political and often intertwined with human rights abuses. By manipulating domestic water resources to meet demand through short-sighted measures based on technology and large-scale engineering, the Iranian Government is triggering an environmental disaster that could lead to violent conflict, mass migration, and food crisis. Minorities are the hardest hit and find themselves disenfranchised from the decision-making process on environmental issues.

3. The report will firstly give a brief overview of the environmental context in Iran. Then, it will address the impact of environmental mismanagement. It will then draw attention to the violation of freedom of expression of environmental activists. Finally, the report concludes with numerous recommendations aiming to protect and promote minority rights in the context of environmental policies.

II. Environmental context in Iran

4. On 19 March 2017, the Iranian Parliament approved the ‘Law on the Sixth Five-Year Economic, Cultural, and Social Development Plan for the

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1396-1400 (2016-2021)’. One of the targets is to reduce water consumption by 30% and to produce 30% of the required potable water for southern Iran through desalination³.

5. Paradoxically, despite the acceptance of the recommendation 138.263 of the last UPR, Iran’s water exploitation in 2015 reached up to 97% of Iran’s surface water. Administration officials only addressed the issue in 2015, when it was already very late. One of the issues causing Iran’s crisis is the premise for achieving agricultural self-sufficiency. Nowadays, Iran can only meet the needs of 33 million Iranians in terms of food supply and has to import the rest⁴.

6. 70 percent of Iran’s groundwater is depleted. The case of Lake Urmia, a saline lake located between the provinces of East Azerbaijan and West Azerbaijan in Iran, reflects a wider trend in the country. Several other bodies of water such as the Hamoun wetlands in the Sistan Basin, the Shadegan wetlands, and Hour-Al-Azim wetlands in Khuzestan have been heavily impacted or dried up entirely in light of weak infrastructure, over-reliance on dams, extreme weather patterns, climatic changes, poor irrigation practices and unregulated use of water⁵.

7. Environmental issues in Iran affects mainly minority-inhabited regions in Iran. The lack of inclusivity in the decision-making process fosters the gap between centre and peripheries in terms of policy impacts. Minority-inhabited territories are resourceful and agriculturally rich. Large exploitative policies coupled with water mismanagement have serious impacts countrywide and are severely affecting the living

⁵ Ibid.
condition of minorities.

III. Ahwaz

8. Arab Ahwazis amount to 2% of the Iranian population\(^6\). The Ahwazi minority is an ethnic minority of the South-western province of Ahwaz, also known as Khuzestan or Arabistan.

9. Khuzestan used to have one third of the country’s water resources with five major rivers. It is Iran’s biggest source of food crops, as well as the leading producer of wheat, and the second producer of maize and rice and 40% of Iran’s sugar production comes from sugarcane coming from that province. Water-grabbing policies have caused enforced displacement in the Khuzestan province. Finally, Khuzestan contributes 90% of the national onshore oil production and a third of the petrochemicals and steel outputs. These industries are responsible for pollution in the region and soaring water demands\(^7\).

10. The Iranian government has not yet completed its dam construction plans. However, the incoherent damming policies have contributed to the dust storm problem. A total of nine dams have been built in the Karkeh and Karoun watersheds to increase supply of water to cash crops, generate hydroelectric power and power the country’s industrial sector. Moreover, billions of cubic metres of water are being siphoned off by dams and river diversion, largely for the benefit of large agro-industrial projects in already arid areas of Isfahan and Fars\(^8\). Toxic


\(^8\)Ibid.
pollution affects the drinkable water in the region. Half of the Karoun water flow is now waste water, as upstream fresh water has been restricted. This will rise further when all the dams project will be accomplished\(^9\). The World Health Statistics Report shows that the mortality rate in Iran is due by 35.2\% to the air pollution\(^10\).

11. The marshlands, meadows and crop-growing fields fed by the Karoun and Karkeh rivers that flow from the Zagros mountains are dust bowls. 500,000 hectares of marshlands of Ahwaz have dried out and this is the main cause of sand storms in the region\(^11\). The UN Environmental Programme concluded: 'most significant wetlands ecosystems has completely collapsed’\(^12\). The Shadegan wetlands as well as the Hour al-Hazim wetlands were dried out and many inhabitants living in traditional houses were forced to leave\(^13\).

IV. South Azerbaidjan

12. Azerbijanis form at least 20-25\% of the population in Iran\(^14\). In recent years, Tehran’s disregard for the well-being of the Southern Azerbijanis has primarily revealed itself through the drought of the Lake Urmia.

13. One of the most precarious issues faced by Azerbijani Turks today is the gradual destruction of Lake Urmia. Due to a negligent dam

\(^{9}\)Ibid.

\(^{10}\)World Health Statistics (2016), available at:
file:///C:/Users/UNPO%20Brussels/Downloads/9789241565264_eng%20(1).pdf

\(^{11}\)Brett, Daniel (2017) ‘Ahwaz’s environmental woes at the epicentre of crisis in Iran’, available at:

\(^{12}\) Ibid.


construction on the part of Tehran, which intensified in 1988 after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the lake had lost 90% of its original water volume by 2015. The devastating consequences of the lake drying up are met with indifference by the central government.

14. The 62 dams – either constructed or planned – in the rivers flowing into Lake Urmia mainly serve purposes of irrigation for intensive agriculture. Meanwhile, due to a lack of adequate water treatment facilities and municipal control, the lake is used entirely as the common sink of the urban, agricultural and industrial waste of the region. This, in combination with a dramatic increase in the lakes salinity, puts the entire eco-system of the lake itself and its surroundings at risk.

15. As environmental issues in Iran tend to be inherently political and arguably intertwined with human rights abuses, the predicament of Lake Urmia is highly politicized. The lake has been at the centre of wider geopolitical concerns, particularly when taking into account that its salt is highly rich in uranium. Moreover, in light of Tehran’s systematic persecution of minorities, it is widely believed that the authorities have been wilfully ineffective and passive in allocating funds for rescue and revival projects for the region, majorly inhabited by Azerbaijani Turks.

16. Given that over half of the Iranian population is non-Persian, there is an urgent need for the inclusion of the country’s multi-ethnic minorities in the political decision-making process. If the Lake Urmia dries out entirely, a humanitarian crisis will ensue and more than four million people could be forcibly displaced\(^\text{15}\). Many people living in the area have eye-problems, respiratory diseases and other health problems caused.

by dust and salt particles blowing in the air\textsuperscript{16}. The farmers complains about salt storms that are diminishing soil fertility and threatening their livelihoods\textsuperscript{17}. This violates the accepted recommendation 138.258 of the last UPR.

V. Iranian Kurdistan

17. Kurds are ranked as the third largest ethnic group in Iran, making up 10\% of the population. The majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims\textsuperscript{18}. They are economically deprived and culturally suppressed. The Kurdish population live in an area rich in natural resources, but at least 30 years of economic exploitation has alienated the Kurds from access to these local resources, leaving much of the economy reliant on agriculture\textsuperscript{19}.

18. Despite the natural resources and vast land of Kurdistan, the Kurdish provinces in Iran are among the least developed and most deteriorated. Thus, the Kurdish people are the poorest ethnic group in Iran in terms of income per capita. The Kurds are captured in environmental issues and terrible poverty, which include poor nutrition, lack of clothing, housing, health and education. The region has seen a sharp increase in the rate of disguised unemployment and drug smuggling operations, especially in the Kurdish areas in the vicinity with the borders of other countries\textsuperscript{20}.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20}Rawabetcenter (2016) ‘Kurds in Iran...periods of oppression’, available at: \url{http://rawabetcenter.com/en/?p=966}
VI. West Balochistan

19. Balochis represent 2% of the Iranian population\textsuperscript{21}. Baloch suffer from violent silencing, forced displacement and media blackout. They also endure harsh environmental policies taken on their behalf, which severely affect their livelihood. This is in absolute contradiction with accepted recommendation 138.257 of the last UPR.

20. The Sistan basin area is divided in three geographical sub-units: the inland delta of the Helmand river, which is mostly drained and used for agriculture, the wetlands (Hamoons) covering the lower delta plain, and a hypersaline lake (Gowd-e-Zareh) in the lowest part of the basin, which collects the overspill from the wetlands and from the Helmand River.

21. In the Sistan region and in the lower stretch of Helmand River the population depends on agriculture: intensive crop production and horticulture provide the basis of daily existence. Livelihoods in the region are strongly interlinked with and dependent on wetlands products and services. The reed beds provide fodder for livestock, fuel for cooking and heating, and raw materials for handicraft and constructions. Fishing and hunting represent an important source of income for many households.

22. The Iranian government also needs to prosecute water-related crimes to raise awareness about resources overexploitation and stop the fatalistic mainstreaming of drought and desertification\textsuperscript{22} and increase the probability of punishment for illegal groundwater use\textsuperscript{23}. This situation targets food and environmental security in the region, which


\textsuperscript{22}Philipps (2017), p.104.

\textsuperscript{23}Ibid.
has wider repercussion as it affects the abovementioned Khuzestan province by causing sandstorms.

VII. Repression of environmental activists

23. Despite Iran’s acceptance of recommendations 138.24 and 138.235 of the last UPR, Iranian forces violently target environmental activists. On 7 February 2015, six people were arrested and attacked because they were demonstrating against environmental policies\(^\text{24}\) and the drying out of marshlands. On 2 May 2015, Masoud Kanaany was attacked by unknown people while he was researching an isolation wall made by an oil company\(^\text{25}\). On 18 May 2016, governmental forces arrested Zakiyeh Neissi, an environmental activist in Ahwaz\(^\text{26}\). On 30 November 2016, Iranian intelligence arrested 22-year-old Hakam Marwani, a photographer, environmental and cultural activist\(^\text{27}\). They also arrested journalist Rahil Mosavi, and environmental activist and Roqaya Jafari on 13 December 2016\(^\text{28}\). On 8 February 2017, a demonstration for environmental justice against the transfer of the Karoon river took place in the city of Ahwaz. The demonstrators were asking for their right to breathe clean air and protesting against environmental policies affecting the Karun River. Suffocating dust in the region is reported to be 66 times above the healthy level\(^\text{29}\). The state repression ended the protests. In violation of the fundamental human right to freedom to

\(\text{\textsuperscript{26}}\) Al-arabiya (2016) ‘عفّن الفارس’، available at: https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/iran/2016/05/18/18.html
expression and juvenile protection, Iranian security forces arrested a 17-year-old high school student and broke his hand for taking part in the demonstration. On 1 March 2017, second year veterinary student and environmental activist Sepideh Gholiyan was also arrested.

24. On the same day, security forces arrested Ali Zergani, an environmental activist, at his workplace. He was then transferred to an unknown location, and according to his family no information was available on his whereabouts. This is in violation of the UDHR and the ICCPR provision on enforced disappearances and the accepted recommendation 138.258 of the last UPR. Intelligence agents confiscated his mobile phone, workers’ phones and workshop CCTV camera, according to local sources. Zargani was active in forming a human chain protest against the rerouting of Iran’s Karoon River water and environmental pollution, as well as in launching Arabic poetry sessions. On 6 October 2016, Amer Salem Silawi was arrested more than three times because of his involvement in his peaceful demonstrations called Karoon chains.

25. On 27 and 28 January, and three weeks later, on 18 February 2017, suffocating dust storms accompanied by power and water supply cuts for 14 hours in Ahwaz and other cities in Khuzestan, provoked public protests against an escalating environmental crisis caused by the

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36 Ibid.
damming of the region’s rivers, the desertification of wetlands and industrial pollution\textsuperscript{37}. The desiccation of the Hoor al-Azim wetlands in Khuzestan is a result of outdated oil drilling. This is seen as being the source of dust storms that took place\textsuperscript{38}.

26. The city of Marivan has an active environmental group called the Chya Green Association, which has also been active in stopping fires, planting trees, holding exhibitions and overall raising awareness about the ecology of the region\textsuperscript{39}. On 9 April 2017, in violation of its commitment to recommendations 138.224, 138.226 and 138.57 of the previous UPR, Iran governmental forces arrested at least 16 environmental activists in Marivan, because they were demonstrating against burying the city’s waste. They were invited by the city mayor to discuss the issue, but security forces arrested them instead\textsuperscript{40}. Their names are: Edris Ravand, Karim Ravand, Rahim Ravand, Faegh Ranin, Ahmad Ranin, Khalife Jalal Ravosh, Faegh Ravosh, Haji Faegh Batkak, Shaif dadeh, Shahram Ranin, Mazhar Moini, Hassan Delangiz, Sharif Bajur, Mamusta Salahedin Dezhak, nazar Haghparast, hiva Manuchehri.

VIII. Conclusion

27. Although the Constitution of Iran guarantees that all the ethnic groups and tribes enjoy equal rights, reality shows otherwise. Iran’s discriminatory policies disempower ethnic minorities to freely express their language, religion, and culture. For the most vulnerable communities, the situation is further worsened by Tehran’s

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
environmental policies that undermine their living conditions. Owing to mismanagement and negligence, the environmental crisis in Iran is directly connected to the issues of food security, mass migration, health hazards, soil deterioration, desertification, water resources depletion and shortages.

28. Tehran’s centralised policies that neglect peripheries, violating the accepted recommendation 138.260, undermine the peripheries’ quality of life and fosters minorities’ repression.

29. The violation of freedom of expression manifests in the several arrests and violent repression of environmental activists, who are trying to engage in a peaceful dialogue with Iranian authorities to find sustainable solutions.

30. The Iranian Parliament has not passed the new water law yet. However, the environmental situation in Iran needs to be pushed from a local and transparent implementation of laws designed by accountable institutions.

31. Local knowledge of ethnic minorities’ practice to establish sustainable water governance policies is mandatory. Decreasing discrimination against minorities can promote ancestral knowledge to preserve their existence.

IX. Recommendations

Given the aforementioned violations, UNPO urges the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran to consider the following recommendations:

- To replace existing customary systems or original common law principles with written rules which will facilitate the most rational use of
available water through appropriate administrative actions in collaboration with ethnic minorities;\textsuperscript{41}

- To adopt a long-term, adequate, consistent, and inclusive strategy for environmental protection that stays consistent with the renewal of parliamentary members every four years;
- To establish adequate water administration for effective implementation and enforcement of the provisions contained in the water laws;
- To increase efforts to include minority representatives in the process of policy and decision-making to address environmental issues and enhance sustainable solutions;
- To end the persecution of environmental activists and engage with legitimate representative of minority communities;
- To be open to discussion with multiple stakeholders, including civil society minority organisations, as well as environmental minority activists, and to provide them with capacity building trainings.