

Death in the dorms: Iranian students recall horror of police invasion

Monday, 13 July 2009

The Guardian

• Victims tell of arrests, threats and beatings
 • Two women among five killed by officers

Saeed Kamali Dehghan

They came in the small hours, just as the dormitories were settling down for the night. Outside, Tehran was still in ferment, a city gripped by fury two days after a "stolen election". Inside the dorms on Amirabad Street, students were trying to sleep, though nerves were jangling; just hours earlier several had been beaten in front of the main gate to the university.

What happened next developed into one of the seminal events of Iran's post-election unrest: police broke locks and then bones as they rampaged through the dormitories, attacked dozens of students, carted off more than 100 and killed five. The authorities still deny the incursion took place. But the account pieced together from interviews with five of those present tells a different story.

"We were getting ready to go to sleep when we suddenly heard them breaking the locks to enter our rooms," said one of the 133 students arrested that night. "I'd seen them earlier beating students but I didn't imagine that they would come inside. It's even against Iranian law."

Forty-six students from one dorm were arrested and taken to the basement of the interior ministry on nearby Fatemi Street. It was there, on the building's upper floors, that the vote-counting and — claim opposition supporters — the rigging, was going on. Another 87 were taken to a security police building on Hafez Street. Students spoke of torture and mistreatment.

Five died: they were Fatemeh Barati, Kasra Sharafi, Mobina Ehterami, Kambiz Shoaee and Mohsen Imani — buried the following day in Tehran's famous Behesht-e-Zahra cemetery, reportedly without their families being informed. Their names were confirmed by Tahkim Vahdat, a student organisation.

Witnesses said the two women and three men were repeatedly beaten on the head with electric batons. Their families were warned not to talk about their children or hold funerals — like the parents of Neda Soltan, whose face became synonymous with the protest movement after she was filmed being shot dead in the street.

Under Iranian law, police, revolutionary guards and other militia are not allowed to enter universities — a legacy of the 1999 student riots. Until last month those riots were the most serious unrest the country had seen since the Islamic revolution.

But with the country convulsed by protests at the 12 June elections, there was no holding back that Sunday night. "The police threw teargas into the dorms, beat us, broke the windows and forced us to lie on the ground," one student recalled. "I had not even been protesting but one of them jumped on me, sat on my back and beat me. And then, while pretending to search me for guns or knives, he abused me sexually. They were threatening to hang us and rape us."

Another described the scene: "The riot police stood in two lines, formed a tunnel with their shields as its roof, and made us run through it again and again while beating us and banging on their shields. "One of my roommates had a broken leg but they still made him run."

Others spoke of similar experiences at the hands of the Basij (paramilitary militia). "The Basiji was on my back and told me: 'I have not fucked anyone for the past seven years, you cute boy! I'll show you what I can do to you when we arrive.' They were harassing us and claiming we insulted them or the supreme leader."

Before being taken away on a bus the students were made to stand in front of a dormitory block with plastic bags over their heads, their hands bound with plastic ties — known there as "Israeli handcuffs".

"I had a second to recognise that it was the main building of the interior ministry in Fatemi Street," said another student, weeping. "I just couldn't believe it, there were senior politicians, members of parliament and investigators on the upper floors and we were in the basement. I have no doubt that they were busy rigging the votes upstairs."

One detainee was abused by guards after he lost control of his bladder. Hours later they were given bread and cheese that had been placed on a dirty floor and warned they would be punished if they refused to eat. A Basiji called Ali filmed

them with his mobile phone, ordering the captives to say "I am a donkey".

Injuries were ignored. One student who had lost an eye after being hit by a plastic bullet was not given medical attention. "We were begging them to transfer these two who were suffering more than others to the hospital but they just said 'let them die'," a witness said.

Later, gas was pumped into the cells when all the students were being held in the security police building. Their ordeal ended 24 hours later when the president of Tehran University, Farhad Rahbar, and Alireza Zakani, a Tehran MP, spoke to the detainees. Rahbar told them that he had given the police permission to enter the dormitories to control the situation – but denied it a few days later.

Before being released the students were ordered to put on fresh clothes supplied by the police. "They didn't want there to be any evidence of what had happened," one of them said. "But what's stronger than 133 students who were there, who saw everything, and suffered?"