

## This beacon of hope must be saved for all who have justice

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Today, there are millions of Iranians living in exile around the world waiting for and working towards a time when it will be safe to return home. The country has been on the cusp of a new revolution for months &ndash; as opposition to the regime has been ruthlessly crushed.

Many of the exiles living abroad and yearning to return to a new Iran were students and intellectuals who individually and in small groups had opposed the Shah's oppressive regime and sought to bring freedom and democracy to Iran. Instead, after the Shah left in 1979, they found their country falling into the grip of an even more repressive and dangerous regime. Over 120,000 have been executed by the regime in the 30 years since they came to power and many more have been and still are imprisoned and tortured on a daily basis.

The various opposition groups, of which the largest is the People's Mojahedin of Iran (PMOI/MEK), which formed the National Council of Resistance in Iran (NCRI) and elected a President elect, Mrs. Maryam Rajavi, an inspirational leader currently living and working tirelessly from France for a free and democratic Iran. She is one of the great women in the world. Anyone who has met her knows that she could offer Iranians the hope which is in such short supply in their benighted country.

Some of the exiles set up home in Iraq in a city called Ashraf 60 miles North East of Baghdad, which is now home to around 3,500 citizens. Here Iranian Kurds, Christians, Shia and Sunni Muslims live together, demonstrating the harmonious and productive possibilities of secular democracy and gender equality.

The Ashraf residents integrated well with the Iraqi people and provided educational and medical support to many of the neighbouring communities. More importantly this little city acts as a focal point and a beacon of hope to the Iranians in exile and to all those still in Iran suffering the daily brutalities and deprivations of the regime.

Inevitably, Ashraf also became the prime focus of fear-fuelled anger and hatred from the Iranian regime who have done everything in their power to destroy its influence, both by blackening the name of the resistance movement and by carrying out attacks on the city.

In January 2009, the American Government handed over protection of Ashraf to the Iraqi government, after allegedly receiving assurances that the residents' human rights would be. However, they were also aware that the Iraqi Government had, months earlier, signed an agreement with the Iranians to close Ashraf and return the inhabitants to Iran, where they would almost certainly be killed.

From the time they took control of the camp from the coalition forces, the Iraqis treated Ashraf more as a prison camp than a home, denying access to friends, relatives and journalists and restricting food and medical supplies.

Many representations were made to the US Government by humanitarian organisations, parliamentarians and jurists from around the world, asking the Obama Administration to fulfill its obligations to the people of Ashraf as Protected Persons. However, the US claimed that the Iraqis had been made aware of their responsibilities towards Ashraf and that the US could not interfere in the affairs of a "sovereign state". The pressure on the people of Ashraf intensified.

In June 2009, the young people of Iran came out in their thousands to protest on the streets of Tehran, Isfahan and other towns in Iran, calling for an end to the regime. The protests were met with brutal force from the Iranian guards, who beat the protestors and took them to jail, where many of them were tortured and even executed.

With the protests in Iran continuing undeterred, the Iranian regime decided to move against Ashraf through their influence over the Iraqi Government. On July 28, 2,500 Iraqi government forces brutally attacked the unarmed and defenceless people of Ashraf, killing 11 and wounding 500 with guns, chains, nailed batons and running them over with their vehicles. The Iraqis abducted 36 of the residents and occupied the city.

The US and UK Governments remained silent, intent on their talks with the Iranian regime about their nuclear programme and discussing the situation in Afghanistan. Many jurists and parliamentarians, including members of the Iraqi Parliament, offered support to the Ashraf residents.

And at last, after 72 days, the 36 abducted were returned to Ashraf, some close to death. The struggle for freedom and democracy continues as does the threat to Ashraf and the Iranian people.

The US Government maintains its position of bearing no responsibility for these people and the UK government reiterates its inability to interfere with the sovereign State of Iraq. However, the degree of Iranian influence on the Iraqi Government makes a mockery of their democracy, for which our brave soldiers fought and died.

The Iranian regime then set a deadline of December 15, 2009 with the Iraqi Government for the displacement of Ashraf. On that day, a number of foreign news reporters managed to get to Ashraf and demanded to see the residents. Their presence showed that the world was watching and almost certainly averted the intended dispersal.

And so we wait for the next move from the Iranian regime and the Iraqi government. The number of people demonstrating in Iran itself is still growing despite the latest law passed by the regime that any criticism is punishable by summary execution.

Many have been tortured and killed over the centuries in the name of Christ and have gone to their deaths with a smile on their lips and joy in their hearts because their faith in God transcended the power of evil. This same sacrificial spirit flows through the extraordinary Iranian community whose suffering and pain will surely be rewarded by fundamental change.

Ashraf must be kept safe as a beacon of hope, not just for the Iranians, but for anyone in the world who cares about peace, justice, freedom and true democracy. That's why the British Government and the US Administration must put urgent pressure on Iraq to end the siege.