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IRAN: One girl dead, 400 schoolgirls poisoned, amidst attacks on schools

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On UN Women's Right Day, Human Rights Without Frontiers urges the UN to send an investigation mission.

Unfettered acts of terror against school girls raise questions of government complicity

School girls enthusiastically participated in major anti-state protests

[Center for Human Rights in Iran](#) (08.03.2023) – Five months into Iran’s “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, in which girls and women were among hundreds killed at nationwide, anti-state protests, at least one girl has died amid hundreds of schoolchildren being deliberately poisoned in major cities including Tehran, Qom, Sari, Ardabil, Boroujerd, Torbat Jam, and Qoochan.

“The deliberate poisoning of school girls in Iran is exposing the fanatical, lawless and violent mentality that is resurfacing under this unaccountable government and trying to force the entire country, especially women, backward,” said Hadi Ghaemi, executive director of the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI).

“This is an act of terrorism, and the Islamic Republic’s failure to take it seriously for months raises serious questions regarding government complicity with groups that have the organizational capacity to carry out such major attacks,” Ghaemi said.

“School girls enthusiastically joined the anti-state protests in Iran,” he added. “Like the Iranian government, the people who are carrying out these attacks are petrified of these girls’ potential and power.”

The inhalational poisonings, which can be traced as far back as November 2022 (two months after major, women-led, anti-state protests erupted around the country), are thought to be the work of extremist religious groups that oppose the education for girls. These groups have found increasingly fertile ground under the Islamic Republic's hardline government.

The poisonings have resulted in many children being hospitalized with symptoms of fatigue, burning throats, nausea, headaches, and numbness in the body. Some victims have described fumes and strange smells, including odors of tangerines and cleaning agents.

At least one schoolgirl has died amid the attacks, though the girl's father, who works for a powerful cleric, and state officials, have refused to confirm the connection.

"Now more than ever, governments worldwide must act to demonstrate their complete rejection of this violent repression and [ramp up collective actions](#) against the Iranian government's anti-women policies," Ghaemi said.

Iranian Authorities Suppress Information About the Attacks

Iranian authorities have been trying to suppress information about 11-year-old Fatemeh Rezaie, who died of gas poisoning at a school in Qom, [tweeted](#) journalist and children's rights activist Hedi Kimiaee on February 27, 2023.

“Even though this student had no prior illness, the authorities are trying to write a false medical report saying she had a long history of illness,” Kimiaee wrote. “Qom’s prosecutor has also warned the family not to talk to the media [and told them to] bury Fatemeh without notice.”

That day, Iran’s state television, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)—which has a documented history of aiding intelligence agencies in trying to force victims of state violence to make false and forced statements on video—aired a [recorded session](#) with Fatemeh’s father, Abolqassem Rezaie.

In a brief statement, he claimed his daughter was not at her school on the day the poisonings occurred. Rezaie added that Fatemeh suffered from pain in her legs and stomach, had bouts of vomiting and fever and died of “severe blood infection.”

Razaie’s father is the driver for a well-known cleric, Majid Talkhabi, who’s a member of the powerful Asse that Fatemeh’s family would link her death to something other than gas poisoning.”

His brother, Ali Rezaie, is meanwhile a junior cleric studying in a seminary school. “They have probably come under pressure from the security agencies,” added the source, alluding to the fact that staff who work for Iranian officials are expected to toe the state line or face severe consequences.

Officials Admit Poisonings Were Deliberate After Hundreds of School Children Fall Ill

On February 24, reformist politician Jamileh Kadivar **estimated** that at least 400 girls have been hospitalized as a result of the attacks thus far.

Two days later, Deputy Health Minister Younes Panahi **said** at a press briefing in the city of Mashhad that the poisonings were a deliberate attempt “by individuals who would like all schools, especially girls’ schools, to be closed.”

“After several poisonings of students in Qom schools, it was found that some people wanted all schools, especially girls’ schools, to be closed,” the state Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) quoted Panahi saying.

Previously, Iranian officials had denied knowledge of the attacks being premediated or deliberately intended to block access to education in the country.

Iran’s education minister Yousef Noori initially dismissed the reports as “rumors.”

The Islamic Republic has a documented history of denying knowledge of human rights violations, and when forced to admit to them, of painting the attacks as being perpetuated by forces outside its sphere of influence.

Schoolgirls Filmed Themselves Without Forced-Hijab, Chanting Anti-State Slogans

Iranian women and schoolgirls have been at the forefront of the current protests in Iran.

Girls in many schools across the country **rebelled** against the state-mandated hijab for all women by filming themselves chanting anti-state slogans and posting the videos on social media. Schoolboys have also filmed themselves supporting the anti-state protests.

In one instance, chanting schoolgirls refusing to wear the hijab **heckled a member of the paramilitary Basij force** as he was giving a speech on the campus.

“The poisoning of students at girls’ schools, which has been confirmed as deliberate acts, was neither arbitrary nor accidental,” **tweeted** Mohammad Habibi, spokesman for the Iranian Teachers Trade Association on February 26. “To erase the gains on freedom of clothing, [the authorities] need to increase public fear.”

Serial Attacks Result in Hospitalization of Children and School Staff

The first **reported** poisoning of school girls in Iran occurred

on November 30, 2022, at the Nour Yazdanshahr training school for girls in the city of Qom, which is considered holy according to Shi'a Islam, and which is 92 miles south of Tehran.

That day, several students and staff were hospitalized though the exact number was not reported.

The same school was hit with [another inhalational attack](#) on December 13, which sickened 51 students and staff and prompted more than 30 families to [sue](#) education officials in Qom to demand an investigation.

Following yet another gas poisoning incident that sent at least [117 school girls](#) to the hospital in Qom on February 14, [angry parents](#) gathered at the governor's office to demand answers. However, the education minister [dismissed](#) the parents' concerns and accused them of being influenced by "rumors."

IRGC Elite Military Forces Sent into Hospitals, Staff Physically Attacked

The Iranian government has responded to the serial attacks by sending elite military forces into the hospitals where victims are being treated. In at least one case, doctors and nurses were physically attacked by unidentified assailants that tried to impersonate the victim's families.

A staff member of the Medical Sciences University in Khorramabad, the capital of Iran's Lorestan province, spoke to CHRI about schoolgirls who had been poisoned in the city of Boroujerd, and who had been transferred to Khorramabad's university hospital for treatment, where the facilities were better equipped.

"The [Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps] have been stationed at the university hospital and they are taking the blood tests to be analyzed by their own specialists," said the staff member who requested anonymity for fear of being penalized for speaking about the state security presence in the hospital.

"Also, on February 23, a group carrying knives attacked the Shahid Rahimi Clinic in Khorramabad and injured several doctors and nurses," added the source. "At first they claimed to be relatives of poisoned students but then it became clear they were not related to any of the staff or patients."

In his February 26 press briefing, Younes Panahi, the deputy health minister in charge of research and technology, [said](#) official investigations had concluded that the students had been overcome by "accessible chemicals" and not by any poison gas used in warfare.

Some activists on social media have [speculated](#) that the attacks are being carried out by an extremist religious group known as Fadaian Velayat, or "devotees of the Islamic state."

Flyers distributed by the group have declared the education of

girls to be forbidden according to their reading of Islam, and the group has threatened to spread their attacks to girls' schools throughout the country.

Also speculating about the case, Mohammad Taghi Fazel Meybodi, a religious scholar, **told** the Shargh newspaper on February 27 that clues from the attacks pointed to a radical Shia religious group as Hezarehgara, which has many followers in Qom and Boroujerd who advocate against education for girls and women.

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