

**FAKHTEH LUNA ZAMANI's VOICE**

"I would like to thank her Excellency Gay McDougall for her tireless work on the issues faced by minorities all around the world. I would like to thank the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights for their continuous support and for their invitation and last but not least, I would like to thank all the participants of VOICES event which have inspired me with their passionate stories in the last couple of days.

Ladies and Gentlemen, my name is Fakhteh Zamani, and I am the founder and current president of the Association for the Defense of Azerbaijani Political Prisoners in Iran. For three years, I have traveled throughout North America and Europe to speak at various forums in hopes of raising awareness towards Iran's minority groups in this struggle for linguistic and cultural rights. Despite receiving countless threats to halt my work, I have tried my absolute best to represent the friends and families of those who have fallen victim to imprisonment and often torture for simply publicly using their mother tongue and-or fighting for the right to study their native language. These are freedoms that we all easily take for granted. These are symptoms of a broad-based system of racism that exists throughout Iranian society.

I have unfortunately had to experience racism while growing up as an ethnic Azerbaijani Iranian. As a result, I have remained sympathetic to those experiencing the same racism. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to be at VOICES to make known the nature of racism and the callous actions of Iran against those who try to expose or contest the racism. But before I begin, I must make it clear that I am not here to single out a specific race or group. I'm here to discuss racism as a societal flaw. Racism in Iran not only comes from the government, but from the whole of the Iranian population. It is a dehumanizing system of oppression that begins at an early age and affects the entirety of person's life. Since more than half of the population of Iran is comprised of minority groups, racism urgently needs to be addressed.

I'm going to start by anecdotally illustrating my experience growing up as a member of an ethnic minority group in Iran. Like most Azerbaijanis, I grew up speaking my native tongue in my home. My parents were very proud of our history, language and culture and as a result, so was I. They told me stories of the great contributions of Azerbaijanis to Iranian society, which truly made me feel like a descendant of a powerful and important people.

This all changed, however when I entered elementary school and I began experiencing racism first hand, not from my peers but more shockingly from my

teachers. We were forced to learn to speak Farsi in school and the use of our native tongue was a serious offense. Our history textbooks completely distorted events in favor of the glory of the Persian race. None of us had access to textbooks written in our mother tongue. Persian culture was regarded as the common identity of all Iranians. The important role of Azerbaijani Turks in Iranian history was downplayed. In many cases, Azerbaijanis were demonized and referred to as “savages”, outsiders who disrupted the great civilizational history of the Persian Empire. Strict adherence to the material was monitored.

Representatives of the Ministry of Education entered our classrooms to make certain that our teachers were following the assigned Material. Otherwise, their jobs would be at Risk. Our teachers, who were often themselves Azerbaijani, followed this system. The ministry of Education guaranteed that children, who spoke any language other than Farsi, were severely punished, usually in the form of suspension or in-class beatings. Those who dared to ask to use the washroom in any language other than Farsi were forced to stay seated and suffer. Racism was not only confined to the classroom. I regularly heard and- or saw my people insulted on the radio, television, and in the state-run press.

This behavior continues to this day. Azerbaijanis are depicted in newspapers as intellectually-challenged, sub-human members of society and often referred to as “donkeys” and cockroaches” throughout Iranian media. Region that are dominant in ethnic minorities are deprived of economic investment. Shopkeepers in predominantly Azerbaijani neighborhoods are even prevented from using non-Persian names; and their shops are vandalized or closed down if they do not comply.

Racism against Iranian minorities, however, is not confined solely to Iran’s borders. I have experienced racist remarks and jokes outside of Iran, by Westernized Iranians as well. Even more disturbing is that racism does not disappear with the level of education one receives. The elite, professors, doctors, etc. still practice this behavior because it is something that is quite familiar to them. Iranian opposition groups are subject to this too. Repeatedly I have heard that in the Mujahideen’s compound in Iraq, which is a base established by Iranian dissidents and exiles bent on the overthrow of the current regime, ethnic Azerbaijanis are not allowed to speak their native languages.

Now there are many who would regard this issue as a small one which pales comparatively to issues such as broader human rights and Iran’s nuclear program. Racism on the minority populations of Iran, however, should be regarded as a very serious problem, one which demands as much serious attention as any other issue confronting the Islamic Regime. Ethnic minorities comprise over half of the population of Iran, so this problem affects a real majority of Iranian society. Azerbaijanis, themselves comprise roughly one quarter of the Iranian population, which translates to around three times the population of Azerbaijanis in the state of

Azerbaijan. Azerbaijanis on both borders share a common language and culture, but while “North Azerbaijanis”, have had independence since 1991 and have been able to flourish culturally and linguistically, “South Azerbaijanis” have been forced to be Persianized for the past 80 years, which has threatened their language and culture. Azerbaijanis have no choice but to assimilate; if not, they are marginalized and prevented from societal advancement. Those who dare to speak out against the system of racism are arrested, tortured and sometimes killed.

This became abundantly clear after the publication of a political cartoon in May 2006 depicting miscommunication between a Persian boy and a cockroach, which represented the Azerbaijani people. In the aftermath, Azerbaijani residents in Tabriz, Urmia, Ardabil, Zanjan, Khoy and Naghadeh \*\*\*\*\* (and many other cities)\*\*\*\*\*took to the streets in protest. The Iranian government’s crackdown was swift and severe. Reports claimed that anywhere from hundreds to thousands were arrested. Many were killed by the security forces. Prisoner of Conscience Abbas Lisani was among one of those who were captured and jailed. His sentence, coupled with the sentence he was given for his refusal to change his shop name to a Persian one, kept him jailed until 6 months ago. During his term, despite several hunger strikes in protest of the harsh treatment he suffered, he continued to be punished severely.

Scores have shared the same fate as Mr. Lisani. For example, Mohammad-Reza Avaz-Pour, a 17-year old activist, is soon set to begin a prison sentence of 15 months for continually promoting the use of his native tongue. On February 2, 2009, Huseyun Huseyni, Asghar Akbarzade, Ardashir Karimi, Behruz Alizade and Rahim Gulami were sentenced to 5-year prison terms for promoting linguistic rights in their university. Worse yet, 25-year old linguistic rights activist Ferhad Mohseni was detained after the anniversary of 2006 cartoon uprising and subsequently tortured and murdered 20 days after his capture. These cases are those which have been publicly reported. Since the Iranian court system is shrouded in secrecy, there may be countless others who are now sharing the terrible fates of the aforementioned.

So fellow anti racist activists; the system of institutional racism and ethnic discrimination should not be kept in the shadow of other seemingly more important issues confronting Iran. Racism is a problem that for people like me means the prevention of linguistic and cultural expression within Iran and a lifetime of cruel jokes and stereotypes. For the braver souls who choose to publicly speak out against this racist practice in Iran, it can mean imprisonment, torture and even death. These are symptoms of a broad endemic problem which exists within Iranian society. If we are to cure this plague of xenophobia, we will be able to hear various languages and to see cultures flourish and society progress. We will see the beautifully diverse cultures of Iran celebrate their heroes and study their histories in their native tongues. Most importantly, we will see the prevention of the torture and death of ethnic minorities fighting for what are human rights.

Raising awareness of this issue is the first step. Together we can turn a small spark into a raging fire that burns down the walls of the institution of racism. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "in the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." Therefore, we must make the entire world aware of the socially-limiting problem of racism that exists within Iranian society and hopefully one day see it erased.

Thank you very much for your time."