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Associate Press

Iranian cleric urges executing some protesters

By WILLIAM J. KOLE

6/26/2009

EDITOR'S NOTE: Iranian authorities have barred journalists for international news organizations from reporting on the streets and ordered them to stay in their offices. This report is based on the accounts of witnesses reached in Iran and official statements carried on Iranian media.

A senior cleric on Friday urged Iran's protest leaders to be punished "without mercy" and said some should face execution — harsh calls that signal a nasty new turn in the regime's crackdown on demonstrators two weeks after its disputed election.

Hard-liners have ordered long sentences and hangings before, and some fear those awaiting trial by a judiciary whose verdicts reflect the will of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei could face the most severe punishments the Islamic system can dish out.

"Anyone who takes up arms to fight with the people, they are worthy of execution," Ayatollah Ahmed Khatami, a ranking cleric, said in a nationally broadcast sermon at Tehran University.

Khatami said those who disturbed the peace and destroyed public property were "at war with God" and should be "dealt with without mercy."

His call for merciless retribution for those who stirred up Iran's largest wave of dissent since the 1979 Islamic Revolution came as Mir Hossein Mousavi, the nation's increasingly isolated opposition leader, has been under heavy pressure to give up his fight and slipped even further from view.

Mousavi said he would seek official permission for any future rallies, effectively ending his role in street protests organized by supporters who insist he — not hard-line incumbent President

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad — won the June 12 election. And an aide said Mousavi's Web site, his primary means of staying in touch with supporters, was taken down by unknown hackers.

Mousavi alleges he was robbed of victory through widespread and systematic fraud. The regime rejects the claim, refusing to consider new balloting, and on Friday, the Guardian Council — Iran's top electoral body — proclaimed the vote the "healthiest" held since the revolution.

Since the election, opposition protesters repeatedly have clashed with security forces who arrested hundreds of people, including journalists, academics and university students. At least 17 people have been killed, in addition to eight members of the pro-government Basij militia, officials have said.

President Barack Obama, joined at the White House by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, hailed the demonstrators in Iran and condemned the violence against them.

"Their bravery in the face of brutality is a testament to their enduring pursuit of justice," Obama said. "The violence perpetrated against them is outrageous. In spite of the government's efforts to keep the world from bearing witness to that violence, we see it and we condemn it."

Obama scoffed at accusations of U.S. meddling in Iran by Ahmadinejad, who on Thursday called for "repentance" from the U.S. leader. Obama added that Mousavi has "captured the imagination or spirit" of those in Iran who are "interested in opening up."

The demonstrations petered out this week under an ever-intensifying crackdown. Mousavi, meanwhile, has sent mixed signals to supporters, asking them not to break the law while pledging not to drop his challenge.

Amnesty International called the prospect of quick trials and capital punishment for some detainees "a very worrying development." It said Iran was the world's No. 2 executioner after China last year, with at least 346 known instances of people put to death. The group also called on the regime to release dozens of detained journalists it said faced possible torture.

Khatami's call for harsh penalties and even death for those who are found to have defied the Islamic system "is certainly an attempt to instill fear in people," said Ann Harrison, an Iran researcher at Amnesty.

Whether the regime will actually follow through — or need to — was unclear. After Iran's 1999 student uprising, the regime sentenced scores to death, but many of those eventually were commuted to prison terms.

Either way, detainees face a fearsome, cleric-controlled judiciary. Courts often convene behind closed doors, rights groups complain that defendants sometimes have little access to lawyers, and the world learns of their fate only if a verdict happens to be announced on state TV.

"Any chances of a trial that meets standards of due process would be very slim," said Aaron Rhodes, spokesman for the New York-based International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

"What the regime is really saying is that any Iranian citizen who has dared express views which aren't consistent with the views of a small hard-line clique is at risk of the most severe punishment the system can deal out," he said. "They are really at the mercy of the system at this point."

In his sermon, Khatami asked the judiciary to "confront the leaders of the protests, leaders of the violations, and those who are supported by the United States and Israel strongly, and without mercy to provide a lesson for all."

He reminded worshippers that Khamenei, the supreme leader, rules by God's design and must not be defied.

The cleric also lashed out at foreign journalists, accusing them of false reporting, and singled out Britain for new criticism. Earlier this week, Iran expelled two British diplomats, prompting the expulsion of two Iranian diplomats by Britain.

"In this unrest, Britons have behaved very mischievously and it is fair to add the slogan of 'down with England' to the slogan of 'down with USA,'" he said.

In Trieste, Italy, foreign ministers of the Group of Eight countries called for an end to the violence in Iran and urged the authorities to find a peaceful solution.

Also Friday, more than 150 demonstrators attacked the Iranian Embassy outside the Swedish capital of Stockholm, throwing stones, breaking windows and injuring one worker, police said. Officers evicted the few demonstrators who climbed in through broken windows and arrested one person, said police spokesman Ulf Hoglund.

Khatami alleged that the icon of the opposition, slain protester Neda Agha Soltan, was killed by demonstrators, not the Iranian security forces. Soltan, 27, was killed by a shot to the chest last week, on the sidelines of a protest.

In London, an Iranian doctor who said he tried to save Soltan as the young woman bled to death, told the BBC she apparently was shot by a member of the Basij militia. Protesters spotted an armed member of the militia on a motorcycle, and stopped and disarmed him, said Dr. Arash Hejazi.

In quelling protests, Basij militiamen have broken up even small groups of people walking together to prevent any possible gathering. Still, dozens of friends and relatives of Soltan managed to pay tribute Friday, arriving at Tehran's Behesht-e Zahra cemetery in groups of two and three, uttering brief prayers and placing flowers on her grave, witnesses said.