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Good morning, everyone.

Welcome to the organization of the American Community's on Capitol Hill panel discussion, honoring the 2023 International Day of the Disappeared. In addition to the 2023 International Day of the Disappeared.

This summer we also commemorate the anniversary of the 1988 massacre of 30,000 political players and the anniversary of the 2022 nationwide uprising in Iran.

As we are meeting today in the United States Congress, on behalf of our organization, I want to take this opportunity to thank the members of Congress for their outstanding support for the people of Iran. And their great work to hold the regime accountable for ongoing crimes against humanity.

I want to particularly thank Congressman Lance Gooden of Texas and his colleague and a Democratic lead co-sponsor of House Resolution 627 for sponsoring House Resolution 627 to hold Ebrahim Raisi and others in the regime accountable for the 1988 massacre as well as killings of the protesters in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2022.

For our part, our community will continue to remain active. In the coming weeks, we'll be beginning a week-long campaign in New York City near the United Nations General Assembly and expected a speech by Ibrahim Raisi.

I want to first ask you please to mute your phones and let us all watch a brief video about the 1988 massacre in Iran.

Video transcribed- Part of Voice over by Geoffrey Robertson QC

Raisi was one of four members of the death commission for Evin and Gohardasht's prisons near Tehran during the 1988 massacre of 30,000 political prisoners. - In July 1988, prisons in Iran, crammed with government opponents, suddenly went into lockdown. All family visits were canceled, television and radios switched off, and newspapers discontinued.

Prisoners were kept in their cells, The only permitted visitation was from a delegation, turbaned and bearded. Before them were paraded briefly and individually, almost every prisoner, and there were thousands of them, who had been jailed for adherence to the MEK.

The delegation had but one question for these young men and women, and although they didn't know it, on the answer their life would depend. Those who answer did not renounce continuing affiliation with the MEK were blindfolded and ordered to join a conga line that led straight to the gallows. They were hung from cranes four at a time, or in groups of six from

ropes hanging from the stage in an assembly hall. Their bodies placed packed in refrigerated trucks and buried by night in mass graves.

By middle of 1988, thousands of prisoners had been killed in this manner, by mistake, without trial, without appeal, and utterly without mercy.

From the onset, Raisi has served as an interrogator, prosecutor and prosecutor general serving as justice minister since March 2019. On his watch, over 500 people have been executed and 1,500 killed at point-blank range in the streets in November 2019. And now he believes he should be lauded and encouraged for his brutality. It is now upon the international community to take a stance. The people of Iran have voiced their historic "no" to the entirety of this regime.

Julia Manchester-

Thank you, Majid, and thank you so much for everyone in person and tuning in virtually. Good morning. My name is Julia Manchester. I'm a national political reporter at The Hill based here in Washington, D.C. I mainly cover U.S. politics, but I was really inspired by the courage of Iranian women who stood up to the regime following the death of Mahsa Amini last year.

I later learned that this was just the latest example of Iranian women standing up to an unjust regime and that Iranian women have actually made up much of the backbone of the resistance to the regime.

Earlier this spring, Ramesh Sepehrad and Ana Sami and I--and they're on today's panel, met for lunch to discuss the ongoing pro-democracy protests in Iran. It was then that I learned about the 1988 Enforced Imprisonments and massacres of political prisoners in Iran.

In July and September of 1988, Iranian authorities forcibly disappeared and executed thousands of political prisoners. According to the Justice for Victims of the 1988 Massacre in Iran, 30,000 political prisoners were massacred and buried in mass graves. This is a number that is also reported by the Washington Post and acknowledged by the Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Bob Menendez.

Four years later, after the massacre, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances. I'm going to read a piece of the Declaration that states that an enforced disappearance happens when a person, persons are arrested, detained, or abducted against their will or otherwise deprived of their liberty by officials of different branches or levels of government, by organized groups or private individuals acting on behalf or with support direct or indirect consent or acquiescence of the government, followed by a refusal to disclose the fate or whereabouts of the person's concern or refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of their liberty which places such persons outside the protection of the law.

Since 2016, the names of those responsible for the massacre in 1988 have been released, and many still hold very high-ranking positions in the government, including the President of Iran, Raisi. However, much has been done to draw attention to the 1988 massacre. Ukraine's 2022 Nobel Laureate vocally voiced support for an investigation into the massacre last year. Also, there is a bipartisan House resolution that has been introduced by Congressman Lance Gooden and the lead Democrat is Congressman Steve Cohen. The resolution condemns the Iranian regime's massacre of political prisoners and calling for justice for all of its victims.

Today we're marking the International Day of the Disappeared and hearing testimony from experts and witnesses. I would like to introduce our virtual panel panelists, Sheila Naenavaie, who is joining us via Zoom and was a political prisoner during the 1988 massacre, and Amir Borjkhani, who was also a political prisoner during the summer of 1988. I'd also like to introduce attorney Anna Sami, scholar and author Ramesh Sepehrad, and attorney Hannaneh Amanpour, whose father was a victim of the 1988 disappearances.

First, I'd like to go to Sheila, who's joining us virtually, to allow her to give her own testimony on the matter.

Sheila Naenavaie-

Hello, everyone. Thank you, Julia. My name is Sheila Naenavaie. I'm an Iranian American living in the greater San Francisco Bay area. Thank you for inviting me to join this panel as a witness and in honoring those who faced forced disappearance in Iran during the summer of 1988.

I was arrested three times and spent a total of eight years in various Iranian prisons. I was first arrested in November 1981 by the Iranian regime's security forces when I was barely 15 years old at my home in Tehran and taken to the notorious Evin Prison, simply for disputing literature of the main Iranian opposition movement, the MEK.

After months of torture with no due process, I was sentenced to five years in trial without a lawyer that lasted less than three minutes. Only four months after my release, I was arrested again in 1987 and was taken to Evin for another two years. The execution, torture, and forced disappearance began in early 1980s, but it was during my second time being arrested that I realized how the regime is systemically killing supporters of the MEK.

Amnesty International has documented the massacre of thousands of political prisoners in the summer of 1988, where those who refused to denounce MEK or their political beliefs were taken to the Death Corridor to face a four-member committee, one of which was the current representative of the regime, Ibrahim Raisi.

Thirty-five years ago, on August 15, 1988, I was taken to the Death Corridor. Today, I'm among the very few survivors. By the time I was released, I realized that I have lost almost all my friends. And to add to my pain, I had no answer for the families who would ask me, what happened to our loved ones? We were all kept in the dark because this state-sponsored killing was kept as a secret.

I may not know where my friends were killed, buried, or forced disappeared, but I can talk to you about their bravery. In the exhibition of the photos, you have today, there are several of my friends who stood their ground and did not bow to the regime's demand. They were fully aware knowing by saying no to this regime their fate is death or disappearance, but they chose the path of resistance.

It is their sacrifice that sets the example and awakens the consciousness of the young generation. That bravery is what is seen today in the streets of Iran. That bravery has brought women to leadership and guides the young people every day.

Last year, this time, we saw the nationwide uprising that shocked the world and put the regime on notice. That uprising continues to grow and evolve.

Today, I play a small part to be the voice of my friends who were killed or disappeared and tell the world that they did not die in vain. Their sacrifice is what is fueling the hope for change in Iran and is the result of a continuous struggle and resistance that has been going on in Iran, especially in prison for many years.

The role of women in this revolution is undeniable in the streets, in the leadership and among the organized oppositions, the MEK and freedom fighters in Ashraf 3.

Let us celebrate the freedom fighters of Iran. Let us honor the sacrifices of many who lost their lives in the bloody summer of 1988 and honor those who continue to sacrifice. Let us not forget that the people of Iran, especially women and girls, know the price of freedom and are not afraid of paying the ultimate price to achieve that. Let us believe in them. Let us also say on this day that we will not forget and we will not forgive. We will not rest until we have justice and accountability. Thank you very much.

Julia Manchester-

Thank you so much, Sheila, for joining us from across the country and for that really powerful testimony. I'd like to turn it now to Amir for his testimony and his experience.

Amir Borjkhani-

Hello everyone, friends, and community members.

Thank you so much for inviting me here to provide my testimony as a 1988 witness based on what I saw or heard in the Iranian prisons.

I am one of the survivors of the bloody summer of 1988, the very summer that in less than three months, more than 30,000 of the fearless and bravest Iranians, who remained committed to their belief and stay the resistance course with their fellow MEK members or the Marxist groups in their resistance against the barbaric regime, paid the ultimate price for a brighter future.

35 years ago, I was in the “death corridor” on August 3rd, 1988. We were all blindfolded. That is where I heard and from underneath my blindfold saw Mohammad Mehdi Vosoghia, one of the top and brightest students from city of Golpayegan, with a loud voice telling the death committee judges “You are the scums who should ask me for amnesty”.

I did not hear what the judges had told him, but I can imagine they asked him to denounce the MEK and ask for amnesty. Pourmohammadi, Nayeri and Eshraghi were the three panel judges who oversaw the massacre in our prison.

I hate to use the word judges as they are nothing but bloody henchmen.

As soon as Mehdi said those words, they dragged him away toward the death gallows. I never saw him again.

Although Mehdi may have disappeared in 1988, but as we witnessed in 2022, his message of resistance and defiance is heard with the voice of Yalda AghaFazli, the brave girl who responded to the regime’s prosecutors in the same manner as Mehdi. She stood her ground and paid the ultimate price. I say this because the story of 1988 lives on very much in today’s Iran in the streets, in prisons and among the resistance units and movement for freedom.

If you look at Fatemeh Mesbah, who was arrested at the age of 13 on September 16, 1981; she did not bow her head to the regime and paid the price with her young life. Let me just add 9 members of her family were also executed by the regime in the subsequent years. It is an amazing coincidence to see the spark of the major uprising in 2022, 41 years later, happened on the same day where Mahsa Amini, the innocent Kurdish girl, was brutally killed by the regime forces.

This is the tree of liberty of the Iranian history is refreshed from time to time with the blood of the patriots. For me, the bravery that I saw in 1981 in Fatemeh Mesbah is the same bravery that I see in Nika Shakarami, who stood up to the regime’s brutal force during the 2022 uprising.

There is a lot to share with you on the bravery and resiliency of all those who have walked the path to freedom and refreshed the tree of Iran’s liberation with their blood. This will continue until this regime is overthrown.

So, where does that leave us. We are now part of a movement for 1988 justice and accountability. Today, thanks to the relentless campaign by the MEK network, families, and relatives of the victims, and all of us, we are a force to be reckoned with. I am very happy to see how members of the US congress are now calling for justice and adding their voice to our voice. The world community should come together to hold those responsible for the crimes that took place during the summer of 1988. I plan to be in New York city when Ebrahim Raisi comes to UN to protests against his presence at the UN. He is not a representative of the Iranian people; he was part of the death committee presiding over the 1988 massacre and must face justice.

Fact finding and information sharing are also very important part of our campaign. As we continue to collect information about those disappeared in the 1988 and those who continue to disappear in Iran, even today, we need to ensure the information is shared with relevant bodies in UN, US Congress, and policy makers. Let us be very clear that what took place in 1988 is a crime of genocide. The Iranian regime wanted to destroy the MEK in every aspect. In my

country, if anyone is seeking justice for the loss of those who disappeared in 1988, they will face prosecution and prison.

For example, Maryam Akbari Monfared, grew up in the regime prison as young child with her mother and sisters during the 1980's. Her three brothers and one sister were killed by the regime during the 1980's. Her one brother, Mohammad Reza, and Roghayeh, her sister, were among the victims of 1988 state sponsored mass killings and forced disappearance. Maryam is a mother now. She has two daughters but she has been in prison in the last 14 years because she is seeking truth and justice for her siblings, asking the simple question of where is their grave site?

As these crimes continue in Iran and so does the resistance and call for justice. The call for justice has grown beyond the crimes of 1988. Families seeking justice for the massacres that took place in 2019 and in 2022 and to this day. While many have been arrested, many more continue to join the call and rise up for justice and truth.

Let me go on record with my testimony that I call for justice for all my friends and cellmates. I call for justice for Ahmad Dehnad, Hadi Dehnad, Mehrdad Ashtari, Ghasem Sofiyan, Mostafa Mohedi, Ghasem Mohbet Ali, Bijan Alizadeh, Mohammad reza Ghorbanali, Naser Saber, Jafar Tajadod, Akbar Gholyan, Yonis Ghodrati, Jafar Kazemi, Ali Saremi, and many many more.

I honor them, I cherish my short moments with all these heroes of Iran who will live forever and light the path to freedom for my people.

Thank you.

Julia Manchester-

Thank you so much for that testimony, Amir. I think everyone really appreciates it. I'd like to go to Dr. Ramesh Sepehrad to start off now with our discussion and talk about and ask what an obvious question to many may be, but to talk about why it's so important now in 2023 to draw attention to this horrific event that happened in 1988 and how it's connected to the events that continue to happen in Iran. –

Ramesh Sepehrad-

Yes, thank you, Julia. And thank you so much for the opportunity to be on this panel with all of the witnesses and the experts. I especially want to extend my gratitude to Mr. Borjkhani for your heartfelt testimony and Sheila for yours.

As you know, this is a very, very important question to address because it's hard to sit in this room and not to feel the presence of those who paid the ultimate price in 1988. It's hard to sit here and understand what they stand up for and how their message lives on and how their message continues to inspire.

As both witnesses shared, it's been 35 years. It is actually August 30th, which is the Day of the International Forced Disappearances that is recognized by the UN. So, when it comes to the horrific crimes that took place in Iran in 1988, what do we know about these crimes?

Number one, we know the massacre was based on Khomeini's fatwa (edict), as you can see in a banner behind me. He issued this fatwa after he was forced to accept the ceasefire in ending the eight-year war with Iraq.

Number two, we know that the death commission was actually formed in more than 70 cities across Iran.

Number three, we know Ibrahim Raisi was a member of the death commission, and he is the current president of Iran, and he was directly responsible for forcibly disappearing and conducting or issuing orders for extrajudicial execution and the secret killing of the thousands of the political prisoners.

Number four, we know these killings took place across Iran, and so far, there has been 59 mass graves across Iran that have been identified based on the good work that's been done with the families and the relatives and the very campaign that Mr. Borjkhani was talking about. The families that are seeking truth and seeking justice and these graves have been documented.

There is photographic evidence of these graves. In fact, Justice for the Victims of 1988 website has a very interesting interactive map, which I invite you all to check out because it's got very important information about where the mass graves are.

Number five, we know the issue was brought to the attention of the UN Secretary General through numerous letters and the telegrams as Mr. Borjkhani just noted by Mr. Masoud Rajavi, the leader of the Iranian opposition. In August, as the killing was still going on and September of 1988. He raised the fact that there have been mass killings. He documented that there's been more than 800 executions taken place.

Number six, we know that most victims, 90% of the victims belong to the Mujahideen-e Khalgh (MEK), as the main opposition to this regime.

Number seven, we know since 1993, Madam Rajavi, the President-elect of the National Council Resistance of Iran, has led a global campaign to expose the regime's crimes and murders, including the massacre of the 30,000 political prisoners.

Number eight, we know Amnesty International has well-documented this massacre and has actually declared these events as ongoing crimes against humanity.

Number nine, we also know there have been several bipartisan resolutions, and most of them with absolute majority calling for an international investigation of the 1988 extrajudicial killing.

This sentiment is actually being shared by the lawmakers in Canada and the European Parliament, many of the current, the former UN officials, and legal experts all around the world.

Number 10, we also know that the Iranian regime is hard at work to eliminate the remaining MEK witnesses, whether they're based in Iran or in Albania, at Ashraf 3, and also destroying the evidence, including the mass graves.

Just recently, we also heard the news that as members and the relatives of the victims are going to the various mass graves, including Khavaran, this year, regime actually prevented the families to visit Khavaran, visiting the mass graves of their loved ones.

This is how afraid the Iranian regime is of the resistance that is taking place in Iran at such a high price. But it also tells you the resiliency of the Iranian people. So, I think, going back to the question that you raised, Julia, why now? And how do we best unveil these crimes against humanity? I would say the pattern of killing has continued in Iran committed by this regime.

Pattern of forced disappearance has not stopped. Iran has seen massacre of political prisoners, as we talked about in 1988, massacre of the Kurds during the 1980s, massacre of the students, intellectuals, the chain killings of the authors and scholars and exiled opponents in the 1990s, massacres on university campuses in 2002, and attack on peaceful protesters in 2017, 2018, 2019, and also the killing of the 1,500 protesters in 2019 and the ongoing killing of the protesters since the uprising in 2022. And not to mention the massacre that took place in city of Mohshar, in the marshes of Mohshar, and how the IRGC, the Revolutionary Guards, opened fire with machine gun, killing people.

This is a pattern. This is a policy that is part and parcel on how this regime survives and stays in power. So, we have a regime in Iran that is responsible for crimes against humanity. These crimes are widespread, it's systematic as Sheila pointed out, and it is a systematic violence against the people of Iran. So, the ongoing detention, disappearances, tortures, killing a large number of political prisoners, and all of the relatives that are being harassed today, or arrested and facing harsh imprisonment, because and simply for asking the questions; What happened to my loved one? Where would they disappear to? This has to come to an end.

These violence have to come to an end, and impunity of the Iranian officials who carried out these crimes, namely Ali Khamenei and Raisi, and all the members of the death committees, the very members as Mr. Borjkhani just raised. The impunity must end.

The prosecution of these officials must start, and the protection of the remaining witnesses and the family members must be assured. As outlined in the House Resolution 627, it's really, really important that we understand that the evidence and the witnesses must be protected so this particular crime should be addressed for the sake of history, for the sake of international humanitarian laws, international human rights laws, and for the sake of humanity.

I think utilizing domestic criminal laws in third countries like Sweden and the way the case of Hamid Nuri was followed through is an important instrument to use in order to trigger and invoke the universal jurisdiction against these criminals. I think we need to pursue more such cases.

United States, in my opinion, should actually take a leading role in rallying the international community, particularly because of its obligation to the people at Ashraf III in Albania. As stipulated in the Geneva Convention of 1951 and the European Convention on Human Rights, there are many witnesses that are now concentrated at Ashraf III in Albania. The very settlement that took place with the support of the United States government, which really by default makes the United States government obligated to ensure the ongoing protection. Also make sure that their rights are being safeguarded. The right to life, liberty, security, and protection of property, and more importantly, the freedom of expression and assembly of the folks in Ashraf 3 must be protected. These are the parameters that has been covered in the House Resolution 627.

For those of you who are joining us from the offices and the staffers, I really do encourage you to take the message back to your offices and urge them to continue this message of investigation, continue the support for resolutions like 627, and continue to keep the message of resiliency that we see in the streets of Iran that is very much related to the, and linked to the crimes that has happened in the past, linked to the resiliency and the resistance of the Iranian people that are standing up to this regime, saying no to this regime, and yes to a secular non-nuclear republic Iran. So, I think to answer your question, Julian, very, very long answer. This is why it's very, very important in 2023.

Julia Manchester-

We talk about seeking justice and holding these officials accountable, but unfortunately, as we've heard time and time again today, these officials are still in high-ranking positions. There are members of the international community, including leaders of the U.S., who are in contact with them, who work with them. So how do we seek justice, and what does that mean in the long term?

Ana (Anahita) Sami-

First of all, I would like to thank you for the invitation and for being here today. It is an honor for me to be here amongst everyone, particularly Mr. Borjkhani and Mrs. Naenavai.

That's a very big question, you know, what does it mean to seek justice? It's an incredibly important question, especially in the context of one of the worst tragedies of history, which was the massacre of 30,000 political prisoners in the summer of 1988. As you heard, the victims of this massacre were mostly young, bright, educated, active members of society. They had families, friends and they had lives. They were all very aware of the ills that plagued their

country, namely the brutal, merciless dictatorship that has been in power since the revolution in 1979.

So, Julia did a fantastic job on defining what an enforced disappearance is. But there's three elements, really, to an enforced disappearance. This was defined by the UN General Assembly in 1992. And these are obviously persons who are detained or abducted against their will by officials of their government, followed by a refusal to disclose their fate or whereabouts, or a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of their liberty. Clearly the individuals who were involved in this massacre fit this definition to a T. Then in December of 2010, so about 18 years later, due to an increased number of involuntary disappearances, and in particular to the growing number of reports concerning harassment, ill treatment, and intimidation of witnesses of the persons who disappeared, The UN General Assembly adopted the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and declared August 30th, today, the International Day of the Disappeared. And we began observing that in 2011.

The timing of this event is obviously incredibly appropriate because, as we've mentioned several times, Iran's current president, Raisi, who was elected in 2021, is well known for his direct role in the 1988 massacres. He was one of four so-called judges, as Mr. Borjkhani pointed out, who made up what we call the Death Commission in Iran, which was a tribunal created to issue so called legal orders to execute political prisoners en masse in 1988. Most of these individuals, as we mentioned, are affiliated with the Mujahedeen-e-Khalgh, the MEK, which is Iran's main opposition movement. And it is terribly unfortunate that Raisi will be coming to the United Nations in New York on September 19 to address the UN General Assembly, an event which is very obviously going to be met with massive protests from Iranian American communities across the United States.

So, back to the question of what it means to seek justice, I think the biggest part of seeking justice is keeping the voices and testimonies of those who have witnessed and lived through or experienced the tragedies such as these mass killings and forced disappearances in Iran alive, and to encourage the documentation of witness accounts.

According to the International Criminal Court, what is a witness? We have fact witnesses that have knowledge who can testify to what happened. They can be crime witnesses, so meaning that these incidents could have happened to them personally. They have suffered harm themselves. Some of these witnesses, again, they have a dual status witness, meaning that they have either witnessed or have incident happen to themselves. And we have insider witnesses who have direct communication with those who were accused. So, the preservation of these types of documentation can be oral or written testimony. But eyewitness accounts, exactly that of the type you heard today, are the key to seeking justice. Nothing, as you all know, nothing will ever bring back those who lost their lives. Nothing will ease the pain and trauma that these families have experienced and are still experiencing today. Nothing will heal the generational trauma that the Iranian regime has committed against their own people. But the commitment to preventing such tragedies from ever happening again is to document the testimonies well and, as we say in the law, to preserve the record. We need to preserve the record.

In my line of work, for instance, as an immigration attorney where we have many, many foreign nationals who testify in court before an immigration judge regarding past persecution that they faced, a judge relies very heavily on the demeanor of the respondent giving testimony in making a credibility determination. And an individual's credible testimony is easily the most important factor in meeting their burden before a judge. So just a snippet of the regulation...

Responsiveness of the applicant or witness, the inherent plausibility of the applicant or witnesses account, the consistency between the applicants or witnesses written in oral statements, the internal consistency of such statement, the consistency of such statements with other evidence on the record. Where other evidence on the record includes the country conditions for which we've mentioned, meaning reports from Amnesty International Human Rights Watch, and our very own State Department who comes out with human rights reports every year.

I have listened to numerous testimonies throughout my life and I can say much, much again like the ones that we heard today and many, many more tragic eyewitness accounts and I can say with confidence that each individual I have ever heard meets and far exceeds the expectations that one would have for an individual who has an eyewitness account and the standard to meet the standard for a credible testimony in a court of law. So, the level of corroboration in detail with the reports of the massacre of 1988 speaks for itself really, and it confirms the veracity of their statements.

Events like the ones that we have today aim to preserve witness testimony, passing laws and resolutions as we have spoken today play an essential role. As we mentioned that House Resolution 627, which is being sponsored by Representatives Gooden and Cohen, a bipartisan resolution, highlights several important parts that really relate to our discussion today.

The resolution, first and foremost, acknowledges the families of those who were executed and were denied information about their loved ones and were prohibited from mourning them in public, as we just heard from Dr. Sepehrad, who said that members of the families were not able to visit the mass graves this year. They highlight that in 2007, many years ago, the report from Amnesty International concluded that there should be no impunity for human rights violations no matter where or when they took place. The 1988 executions should be subject to an independent and partial investigation, and those responsible should be brought to justice.

In addition, it emphasizes that the United States should be involved in any establishment of an international investigation to the 1988 killings, and most importantly of all, it highlights that over 900 women and men of Ashraf-3 are former political prisoners who witnessed prison crimes of the Iranian regime, and many of them are witnesses to the 1988 massacres and other political killings in Iran, and of course eyewitnesses to the crimes committed by Ibrahim Raisi.

They must be fully protected for potential testimonies before any international courts investigating the killings in Iran. And for points of action, the resolution urges the administration

in the United States to publicly condemn the massacre and pressure the government of Iran to provide details to the families of the victims of their loved ones and their final resting place.

They call on the government in cooperation with Albania to ensure the protection of Iranian political refugees in Ashraf 3 in Albania and for them to benefit from all the rights stipulated in the Geneva Conventions. And finally, it calls on the UNHCR to include the massacre of thousands of political prisoners in the agenda of the Fact-Finding Commission for an Independent Investigation, which was launched last year by the United Nations to investigate the ongoing deadly violence of the protesters.

The protection of the members of the MEK has been a priority for the United States and for the administration. In time, the U.S. has shown its commitment to the victims of the brutal government in Iran. They have taken steps to these crimes...So, in short, the U.S. plays an essential role in preserving these records and recognizing their obligations, which stem from the commitments, of course, that the United States has with the Geneva Conventions and certainly applies to members of the MEK.

In particular, I want to highlight to here something that I also came across myself, that when we mention victims of forced disappearances, victims are not only the individuals who disappeared, everybody else who suffers harm due to the disappearance. And so many of us here today, in fact, I would say a majority of the individuals here today, including myself, we play a pivotal role in ensuring justice is sought for the victims and their families.

I want to close by quoting Professor Ariel Duleski, who was the chair of the UN working group on enforced disappearances, enforced and involuntary disappearances from 2013 to 2015. He said this in a recent speech in Paris at the NCRI, National Council of Resistance of Iran's International Conference on the 1988 Massacres. He says, "When we are talking about disappearances, we are talking about many more than just those who disappear. And when we hear today about the right to truth, the prosecution of those responsible, that's not something that is given to you. That is a right that you have. It is a right to achieve justice. It is a right to have accountability."

I hope those words are very empowering here for everybody because we all have a role in a voice in seeking justice. And certainly, in the case of these forced disappearances, the investigation and documentation of this crime against humanity by protecting and preserving those who were witnesses is indispensable to the question of justice and how we strive towards it and for all those affected by this tragedy. So again, a very long response, but I hope I've been able to cover some of those major points.

Julia Manchester- Thank you, Anna.

Julia Manchester-

Hannaneh, you know, you have a very personal connection to the summer of 1988, and I would love to get your take on, you know, if justice and accountability will heal the willows for what the families of the victims of the massacre have been disappearances have gone through?

Hannaneh-

Thank you, Julia, and thank you to my fellow panelists and witnesses here today. Thank you to all of you and those joining us virtually. And a special thank you to Representative Gooden and Representative Cohen for leading the charge on House Resolution 627.

In short form, the answer to that is a resounding and unequivocal yes. The Iranian people are still reeling over what happened in 1988, me included. And to provide a little background on my own personal experience, my father was murdered by the Khomeini's regime in 1988. I was five years old at the time. He traveled to the frontier where he was working on a book, capturing the stories of political prisoners when he was swept up with thousands of other members and supporters of the Mujahideen-e khalgh that were leading the charge against the regime at that time.

There was no body. There were no witnesses to his murder. There was no grave, and we only knew that he was gone from a secondhand testimony of sightings from events leading up to his death. He was here one day, and he was gone the next. There was no accountability. There was no grieving-- when I say grieving, there was no grieving in the way that most of us recognize it. There was no closure. And the unfortunate reality is that my story is not unique. So, like me, the hearts and minds of the Iranian people were forever changed by those events. Those very events and the fact that the same bad actors that perpetrated those events continue to rule the country today with impunity plays no small role in what's taking place on the streets of Iran today.

When the Iranian president is a former member of the death commission responsible for the forced disappearance and mass execution of 30,000 political prisoners, what does that say to people? It says that you can commit these horrible atrocities, the world can watch you do it, and you can continue on, and round and round we go. It's one thing to give your life for what you believe in, for your country, for your religion, for all the things that we value. It's another thing to make that choice, knowing that it may be in vain, that your sacrifice will go unrecognized and with impunity for those that took your life. These young women and the young people in Iran that are taking to the streets now are making that brave decision against this backdrop.

Crimes against humanity are not bound by any statute of limitations. So, while the 1988 massacre was perpetrated over approximately 35 years ago, it's still prosecutable today, and justice and accountability matters. It matters in healing the wounds of the people that have been affected by this regime. However, until the international community holds the perpetrators of the 1988 massacre accountable, the Iranian people cannot begin to heal. And perhaps more importantly, the authorities will continue to be emboldened to further crack down with impunity on the present-day protesters.

Iranian officials construe the silence and inaction of the world and the international committee at large as acquiescing in their crimes against humanity. We've seen this across time, across the world. We saw this in places like Argentina, Guatemala, Peru, around the world. We've seen where a failure on the part of the international community to hold perpetrators of these crimes accountable does not allow for a people and a country to move on, to heal, and to effect real change in the parts and minds of people. So, does justice and accountability matter? It absolutely matters. It goes such a long way for me, for every person in this room, for the Iranian people in this diaspora across the world.

Someone said something to me once, and it always stuck with me. They said, there's no such thing as a non-political Iranian. We don't have a choice. We are a product of what we have been brought up in, what we've encountered. And there is no Iranian out there in this world that has not been affected-- either lost a family member, been imprisoned themselves, you name it. There is no Iranian out there that has not been affected by this regime in some form or another.

Thus, in order for us to take those steps, those people need to be recognized. They need, their pain, their suffering needs to be recognized and the people that have committed those acts need to be held accountable.

Julia Manchester-
Thank you, Hannah.

I think we have Sheila still on Zoom. If I could pose a question to her. She's still, she dropped off.
- Oh, she dropped off, okay. In that case, we'll go to Amir.

Amir, what's your message for the families of the victims of the summer of 1988 in Iran who are watching us today.

Amir--Translation by Ramesh Seppehrad;
As a survivor, my message to the family members and the relatives who can hear me today is that although I may not have had the courage like your loved ones back in 1988, but I made a commitment to be their voice, to continue to advocate on this topic until justice is served. My commitment to them lives on and will continue the campaign for justice and for accountability.

Julia Manchester-
Thank you, Amir and Ramesh.

Hannah, I have another question for you. On that note, what does the future look like for relatives such as yourself of the victims as you continue to seek justice and rally those around? What does that look like?

- So, the unfortunate truth is that we don't know what that looks like because we're still working, everyone in this room and everyone across the world still working to bring about that justice and accountability. What I hope it looks like is that there are some answers for the people that have been affected by this regime. I'd like to share a personal story that sort of cements the idea of what this means for me.

A few years after my father died, I was a young preteen at the time, and I had a dream. I woke up, and I was in tears, and it felt so entirely real. And my dream was that my father was out there somewhere. And he had been injured and suffered some sort of amnesia. And he was still out there. And I was going to find him. I remember going to my mom and telling her the story. And somehow, the idea of him being out there living this other life was better than the alternative, which was the reality that he had suffered this horrible death and he was never coming back. There were no answers. There was no grave for my sisters and I to visit for my mother. There was no closure on that. I remember vividly how much it took for her to sort of convince me that that's not the reality as much as you want that to be true.

The reality is that he gave his life in a very brave way. And we are going to continue to pay that price with him, because we're going to continue to remember him. And so, I mean, what does it look like in the future? I hope that that little girl gets an answer at some point that has some confirmation of losing someone so important. And there's some justice and accountability for the people that carried out this act. And that I can be sure that he is not out there, as my 11-year-old-self imagined, living some life where He just doesn't remember us because if he did, he would come home. So, I hope that people like myself, and there's so many of them, have those answers for their family members, for their loved ones that have been lost, for people like our witnesses here today that did not enjoy any sort of due process and the punishment that was handed down to them for committing absolutely no crime at all, while the people that committed those crimes go with complete impunity.

We need those answers, and I hope that those answers are what we are working towards. And having the support of the US Congress in things like the House Resolution 627 is really the ways that we can hopefully bring about those answers and bring about some closure.

Closure, I think, is the most important part of this. Perhaps even more importantly, is ensuring that this regime understands that they cannot continue to do and to commit the crimes that they have been committing for over 40 years, and that the world is watching them, and the world is on the side of the Iranian people.

Julia Manchester-

Anna, you touched on this a little bit in your remarks, but do you think the international community as a whole is doing enough to address not only what happened in 1988, but the subsequent horrific events that continue to happen in Iran?

Anna (Anahita)-

Oh, Julia, that's a good question.

I always think to myself that as long as we have victims, we aren't doing enough. As long as there are individuals who are still being killed every day, there is still much, much more work to do. And I definitely touched on the issues of, you know, the things that the resolution 627 points to, most importantly, the role that the United States can play since we are here. But I actually wanted to again highlight how important it is for the discussion of the killings that have happened in Iran to continue to be part of the dialogue and the discourse. It's terribly unfortunate, but killings are not a new thing for Iran.

The commission that was established in November of last year by the UN to investigate these ongoing violence, as Dr. Sepehrad mentioned, this is a pattern of practice for the Iranian regime. Executions and killings are a pattern of practice. Therefore, the individuals who were involved in the 1988 massacre should continue to be part of the discussion. And all of the prosecutions that Dr. Sepehrad mentioned, the Sweden's example in Europe prosecuting one of the most heinous individuals of the Iranian government. Of course, there are things that are being done, but there is for sure much, much more work that needs to be done in this arena.

Ramesh-

Julia, can I just add to that? I think Ana brings up a very good point. The case of Hamid Nuri that actually was a criminal case in Sweden, because of the fact that there are several hundred witnesses, to Ana's point, earlier in Albania in Ashraf 3. In a very unprecedented move, that court hearing was actually moved to Albania so that the witnesses can take part and provide their testimony. These types of engagements with the witnesses and the actual assurance and the protection of the witnesses is really critical for the international community to step up and make sure the families and the relatives can get some answers.

It's very, very hard to come to closure when you don't have an answer, when your loved one has disappeared. The only way that perhaps can be thought about as a way of how does the healing take place is perhaps in the case of South Africa when there was a truth and reconciliation process. Iran is going to have its own moment for truth and reconciliation. But for us to get there, we need to make sure that the evidence is preserved, to Ana's point. We need to make sure that the witnesses are protected, as defined in the House Resolution 627. And we need to make sure that the access to those witnesses is actually available to the international experts and the legal attorneys so that they can surface their testimony in order to be able to bring those perpetrators to justice and hold them accountable. So, I think those are really key elements in terms of not just the healing, but also the role of the international community.

Julia Manchester-

Dr. Sepehrad, I want to pose a question to you that was originally meant for Sheila, and please, if anyone else on the panel would like to chime in, I invite you to.

We know that Iranian women have played such a critical role in a number of the uprisings against the regime. I'd love to know how, what was the experience of women in 1988 and how has it impacted women in the resistance today?

Dr. Sepehrad-

I think that's a very, very important connection to be made. I think what you talked about from the perspective of the 1980s, the waves of protests, the waves of arrests, and unfortunately, the ways of killings and execution. There were a lot of young women among them. I remember Time Magazine had an article, and it had a picture of several girls and really talked about how these girls were executed. They were so defiant to the regime that they did not even disclose their name. And when the prosecutor asked them, what is your name? They chose to respond and say, I am a mojahed, meaning I'm a member of the MEK. They still issued the execution and killed those girls.

It is the defiance that lives on today. And I think the defiance that Mr. Borjkhani, when you talk about Nika Shahkarami, and many, many of the young girls that we saw in their protests in Iran in the last several months, that resiliency, that defiance lives on. It's part of our culture.

Hannaneh brought up an excellent point. I think, as you said, there is no Iranian out there that is not political. All of us have been touched by it in so many ways. However, what's important is that Iranians are moving away from being victims and moving away from just being survivors. They're now empowered. And especially women are now empowered. They're leading, and they are the change agent in the streets.

There is a recognition, increasingly a deeper recognition about the role of the resistance units in Iran that women are taking part, young girls are taking part. And I think that is the reality of our society.

Mr. Borjkhani, you talked about the Tree of Liberty in Iran that is refreshed with the blood of the patriots from time to time. I wrote that note down as you were talking. And I think women and girls are leading that front. And it has become multi-generational. You see mothers, you see daughters, you see sisters, you see wives. I think that is an incredible message that's coming from Iran.

I think if you look at even the makeup of the Iranian opposition, the role of Maryam Rajavi, the President-elect of the National Council on Resistance of Iran. Iran's main opposition is led by a woman, and it is a Muslim woman who fights for a secular democratic Iran, she fights for a republic Iran. So, I think women from all walks of life, women from all different point of view, Muslim and non-Muslim different ages, are really gaining their voice and speaking truth to power in Iran, and it's incredible.

Julia Manchester-

All right. Well, thank you so much for everyone for coming in person and for tuning in. This was just such an eye-opening experience, especially for me to listen to this testimony and a special thank you to our panelists for sharing your testimony and experience. You know, it's an honor to hear it, so thank you very much, everyone.

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