

## **Taha Ghasemi: Prison and Torture in Iran**

By Bob Pounder

As I drive into the chapel car park, I see that Taha Ghasemi is already there, standing near the entrance doors waiting for me. He looks pleased to see me, smiling but tired. Taha is 28 years of age, a Kurdish refugee from Iran. He is destitute, with no right to work or to seek benefits. According to government terminology he's not a refugee but a 'failed asylum seeker'. He has nowhere of his own to live and so he's forced to share a room with a friend, who allows him to sleep on the floor. He describes his friend, who is also an asylum seeker, as a 'compassionate person' who shares his meagre resources with him. "It's a lonely life" admits Taha, but the friend is in a bad position too.

Life is tough; he cannot stay with his friend during the day and spends his time in the town centre, with long hours in the local library and with fellow refugees who share a similar existence, an almost meaningless limbo, at the fringes of society without money or direction. Every Thursday he picks up a bag of free food from the Oldham Unity Destitution Project, a non-religious, non-political organisation based at the local Baptist Church.

We sit in the chapel social room drinking tea as Taha, who comes from the Kurdish city of Mahabad in Iran, reflects on his life as a destitute asylum seeker in the UK. "A few times I've been into Manchester", he says, "to try to find some accommodation, and I'm asked for money - but I don't have any money." He once went to the charity *Refugee Action*, they sent him to a church in Salford. Taha said, "But when I got there I found that it was a place for drunks and drug users, they offer you a bed but there are twenty people all sleeping in the same room, the place smells and all you can say is that it's better than sleeping outside at night. If you queue up they will give you something to eat. The beds are available at 7 pm but you have to leave the premises before 10 am the next morning."

"This is my life in the UK, without 'leave to remain'. It is no life at all, it is very hard," he says. "I've been here for nearly six years, I know I cannot return to Iran, I am always thinking about my life, and wonder how I can make any kind of life for myself."

The struggle for Kurdish rights in Iran brought Taha in to conflict with the authorities in Mahabad. Early in 2006 he attended a Kurdish demonstration which was fired on by the local militia. Taha remembers "a number of people were hit by gunfire and then everyone started to run for cover." Within hours he was arrested, accused of being on a demonstration, and driven to a holding centre and then placed in a tiny cell that was about one metre wide and three metres long.

After twenty four hours he asked for food, the guard asked for money and since Taha had no money, no food was provided. And worse was to come, Taha refused to admit that he had been on the demonstration because that would have meant a long prison sentence, three to seven years, and the KDPI (Kurdish Democratic Party – Iran) always advised that its members or supporters should admit nothing to the Iranian authorities. There were inducements from his interrogators, including immediate

release if he would become an informer and supporter of the regime. There were other questions too, like did he take drugs? Drink alcohol? Or smoke?

Then the torture began. Taha was given a special shirt to wear so that the marks wouldn't show on his body, then beaten with rubber truncheons. His captors tied him to a chair as they slapped him around the head and punched and thumped him in the chest. The beatings continued as he was hung from the ceiling by a rope, with his hands tied behind his back, for up to two hours at a time. "The pain was so bad, I was crying", recalled Taha. Taha could hear the desperate screams of other anonymous victims who were also being tortured.

As he was being forcibly strapped into another chair he noticed that it was connected by cables to some sort of light bulb socket. An electrical contact was fixed to his big toe and then the power was turned on. After several sessions of agonising torture the toe nail died and was pulled from the flesh. Once, when Taha could take no more, he fell to the floor bleeding and his captors responded by screaming at him to "get up!" as they kicked him, making his mouth bleed and breaking one of his teeth. In such places there are no civil or human rights, no solicitors and no visiting rights. Here Taha's ordeal continued every day for ten days, there was no edible food, only water to keep him alive, then he was blindfolded, handcuffed and moved to jail in Mahabad.

At the jail in Mahabad, he shared a cell with nine other prisoners, by this time he was very weak, ill and unable to eat. At this prison there was no torture or beatings, and although the conditions were very poor, dirty and overcrowded, he was given pain killers, his wounds were cleaned and allowed to heal, but by now his hair was falling out in clumps. His parents were allowed to visit him and his mother wept when she saw him. The prison was populated with criminals and 'political prisoners' some of the inmates were awaiting execution and drug taking (heroin) was rife. After approximately three weeks Taha was again blindfolded and removed to the prison in Urmia a distance from Mahabad of about 79 miles. The regime there was grim and cold but at least there was no torture. Finally, after two months in Urmia making an over all total of three months imprisonment Taha was released, with severe warnings of what would happen to him if he became involved in any pro-Kurdish activities.

Within two months of his release the Iranian police became aware that Taha was still actively working for the Kurdish Democratic Party when he was spotted posting pro-Kurdish leaflets in the area around Mahabad. A warrant for his arrest was issued and it was clear that the consequences of being arrested again would be dire, carrying with it the possibility of a ten year prison sentence, more severe and extensive torture and even death. Taha was faced with no alternative but to flee Iran finally arriving in the UK in September 2006.

Taha has been destitute in the UK since June 2010. He lives in fear of deportation. His case is now being supported by Oldham Unitarian Chapel and individuals who are supporting his claim. Due to these efforts the specialist Manchester immigration solicitors, Latitude Law, have been able to assess Taha's claim and arrangements are in hand for a full medical assessment to be undertaken by the charity *Freedom From Torture* (formerly *The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture*). Details of his case and photographs can be found at [www.oldhamunitarians.org.uk](http://www.oldhamunitarians.org.uk) and more information about the Campaign to End Asylum Destitution, supported by

the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, can be found at <http://www.unitarian.org.uk/info/asylum.shtml>. Please help.

**Could you help by making a donation to Oldham Unitarian Chapel? Your donation will be used directly to fund the ongoing legal costs of Taha's campaign.**

**Does anyone have a spare laptop computer to donate? Taha spends his days at the local library but a laptop computer of his own would help him to overcome his isolation and importantly to develop his English language skills.**

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