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Iran: Hunger strikers at serious risk of death

The Iranian authorities should immediately release journalist Akbar Ganji who is running the risk of death as he enters the 55th day of a hunger strike today to protest his detention. The organization is also calling for Manuchehr Mohammadi to be released for medical treatment. He has been in a coma since 24 July following a hunger strike.

"There may still be a chance of saving the lives of Akbar Ganji and Manuchehr Mohammadi. We call on the Iranian authorities to release Akbar Ganji unconditionally and immediately and to allow Mohammadi prompt medical leave," said Lamri Chirouf, Deputy Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme.

Akbar Ganji was rushed to the Milad Hospital in Tehran on 17 July after refusing food for 37 days. Tehran's Chief Prosecutor then said he was hospitalised in order to have surgery on his knee. He had reportedly lost 23 kg during his hunger strike, which he began in protest at being denied access to medical care for chronic asthma, despite specialist recommendation that he be treated outside prison. He is also demanding to be released unconditionally.

"Akbar Ganji should be given any medical care he has sought and consented to and should be allowed medical parole so that his health can be assessed and appropriate care provided," said Lamri Chirouf.

Manuchehr Mohammadi fell into a coma on July 24 after starting a hunger strike on 6 July, in protest at the authorities' refusal to grant him leave from prison to receive medical treatment. Manuchehr has suffered serious health problems in prison, some reportedly caused by torture and ill-treatment, and the conditions in which he has been held. He has allegedly been denied adequate external medical treatment, although prison doctors have recommended it.

"We urge the Iranian authorities to ensure that Manuchehr Mohammadi receives all necessary medical attention that is compatible with his expressed wishes. He should be transferred from prison to a hospital and be allowed to remain outside the prison on medical leave while he is diagnosed and treated," said Lamri Chirouf.

Amnesty International is equally calling on the authorities to order an urgent judicial review of Manuchehr Mohammadi's case, and to release him immediately and unconditionally if the review finds that he was imprisoned solely for the expression of his conscientiously held beliefs.

The organization is deeply concerned about the harassment and arrest of people associated to Akbar Ganji's case. Leading human rights defender and lawyer Abdolfattah Soltani who is a member of

Akbar Ganji's legal team, and also of the family of Zahra Kazemi, was arrested on 30 July while holding a sit-in at the building of Tehran's Bar Association. Soltani was protesting a warrant for his arrest, along with a search warrant for his home both issued by the Chief Prosecutor for Tehran, Said Mortazavi, on 27 July.

Fellow human rights defender and Nobel Peace Prize Winner Shirin Ebadi, lawyer for Akbar Ganji and the family of Zahra Kazemi, has recently been the focus of increasingly critical and threatening statements by officials at Tehran's Public Prosecutors Office.

Masoud Bastani, a journalist who was preparing a piece about Ganji's condition, was also arrested on 25 July with 14 others outside the Milad hospital where Ganji is being held. He is being held at Tehran's Evin prison.

The apparently unjustified interference in the work of lawyers seeking to represent their clients and uphold human rights standards must stop. Amnesty International calls on the Office of the Supreme Leader to intervene to stop the spiral of harassment and to direct the judiciary, government and parliament to implement the provisions of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

Amnesty International is also calling on the Iranian authorities to conduct an impartial and thorough investigation into the recent assassination of Masoud Moghadas, the judge who ruled in the case of Akbar Ganji. Moghadas was shot dead in his car in broad daylight on Tuesday in Tehran.

Background:

Akbar Ganji was arrested in April 2000 together with 17 other Iranian journalists and intellectuals. He was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment, which was reduced on appeal to six months, for "taking part in an attempt against national security" and propaganda against the Islamic system". In July 2001 he was tried on charges of "collecting confidential state documents to jeopardize state security" and "spreading propaganda", and was sentenced to six years' imprisonment. Akbar Ganji has already served five-and-a-half years of his six-year sentence. On 14 July, he was put under medical surveillance in the prison hospital, with the prison physicians reportedly examining him two to three times a day.

Manuchehr Mohammadi is accused of having a leading role in the July 1999 student-led protests. He was shown on television "confessing" to involvement with "counter-revolutionary agents" and charged with offences relating to national security. Following a manifestly unfair trial was reportedly sentenced to 13 years' imprisonment, which was later reduced on appeal to seven years. At the end of November 2003, his seven year prison sentence was extended by two years: one year for having had interviews with foreign media while on leave from prison and another for issuing 'political statements' while in prison.