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Iran: Authorities maintain pressure on women's rights activists as anniversary of demonstration approaches

Amnesty International is calling on the Iranian authorities to release immediately and unconditionally two women detained in connection with their peaceful activities to promote equal rights for women, to halt all trial proceedings that could result in the imprisonment of other prisoners of conscience and cease the harassment of those campaigning to uphold women's rights in Iran. The organization is concerned that such protestors have been increasingly targeted since 10 April 2007, when Minister of Intelligence Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejeie publicly accused the women's movement and student campaigners of being part of an enemy conspiracy aiming at a "soft subversion" of the government in Iran.

Amnesty International is also calling on the Iranian authorities to respect the internationally recognised rights to freedom of expression and assembly and to permit a gathering planned for 12 June 2007 to go ahead. The authorities should also ensure that the policing of the meeting is consistent with international standards on law enforcement such as the United Nations Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials, and that there should be no repetition of previous incidents when police have attacked or otherwise used violence against peaceful women's rights and other demonstrators.

Arrest of activists

The Iranian authorities have arrested two members of the "Campaign for Equality," which aims to collect a million signatures of Iranians in support of demands for law reform to end legalised discrimination against women, in the run up to the first anniversary of a demonstration to demand equal rights for women under Iranian law.

According to the Campaign's website, (http://weforchange.info/english/spip.php?article100&var_mode=calcul), Ehteram Shadfar, a 62-year-old member of the Women's Cultural Centre, who has been active collecting signatures for the campaign, was arrested at 1pm on 10 June 2007 by police who came to her house with a 50-year-old neighbour, who does not wish to be identified, who had apparently been arrested while collecting signatures. According to Maryam Taghavi, Ehteram Shadfar's daughter, her mother was taken away by a plain clothes official, a chador-clad woman and a soldier, who possessed no arrest warrant although such a warrant is required under Iranian law.

The officials said the women would be questioned and would be returned to their homes after an hour. However, they were not released. They were taken to Niloufar police station and then transferred to the Vozara Detention Centre, where they are

believed to be still held, after a judge issued an order for their arrest. No charges are known to have been brought against them, but activists believe they have been detained in connection with their collection of signatures for the campaign. Amnesty International believes they are prisoners of conscience, held solely for the peaceful exercise of their internationally recognized right to freedom of expression and association and should therefore be released immediately and unconditionally.

The Iranian authorities have also made other arrests of people collecting signatures in support of the campaign. They include five women active in the “Million Signatures Campaign” who were arrested on 2 April 2007 while collecting signatures in Laleh Park in Tehran. Three were released after one day in detention, but Mahboubeh Hossein Zadeh and Nahid Keshavarz were taken to Evin Prison and were released only on bail on 15 April 2007. They were reportedly accused of “acting against state security through propaganda against the system”.

Reprisals against participants in the 12 June 2006 demonstration

At a peaceful demonstration on 12 June 2006, around 70 activists were arrested, some of whom were beaten by police. Most were released shortly afterwards, but Sayed Ali Akbar Mousavi-Kho'ini was held for over four months and alleges that he was tortured in detention. Several of those who attended the demonstration have faced judicial proceedings: Zhila Bani Yaghoub, a journalist, was acquitted of the charge of attending an illegal demonstration in February 2007. Five others have since been sentenced to prison terms: on 18 April 2007, Fariba Davoudi Mohajer was sentenced to four years' imprisonment, of which three years were suspended, and Sussan Tahmasebi was sentenced to two years' imprisonment, of which 18 months were suspended; on 24 April 2007, Branch Six of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran sentenced both Noushin Ahmadi Khorassani, Shahla Entesari and Parvin Ardalan to three years' imprisonment for “collusion and assembly [intended] to endanger national security,” of which two-and-a-half years were suspended. None of these five are currently detained, pending the outcome of appeals against their sentences.

In May it was announced that Behareh Hedayat, a university student and Head of the Women's Commission of the Office for the Consolidation of Unity, a student organization, had been sentenced to two years' imprisonment, suspended for five years, on charges of “acting against state security”. She had been tried in April, without the presence of her lawyer, and was reportedly acquitted of two other charges of “participating in an illegal demonstration” and “disturbing public order”. Other women have also been summoned to court sessions although their verdicts have not yet been announced.

On 4 March 2007, at one of the trial sessions of the five women sentenced in April, the police arrested 33 women who had gathered peacefully outside the courtroom to protest about the trial. All were released, some on bail, but some are continuing to face harassment and persecution by the authorities. For example, Zeinab Peyghambarzadeh, a student and women's rights activist who is involved in the Campaign for Equality, was detained on 7 May 2007, after being summoned to court in connection with her participation in the 4 March gathering. She was released on bail on 16 May, after court officials had repeatedly obstructed her father's attempts to meet the bail payment. She had also spent four days in detention in January 2007 while collecting signatures on the Tehran metro. On 18 April six other women reportedly attended a court session in which they were interrogated about the 4 March gathering. Parvin Ardalan, Zara Amjadian, Elnaz Ansari, Nasrin Afzali, Niloufar Golkar and Marzieh (Minoo) Mortazi Langaroudi were reportedly charged with “gathering and colluding to disturb national security”, “disturbing public order” and “disobeying the orders of officials”. Also in April, Azadeh Forghani, who on 11 April, was given a two-year

suspended sentence in connection with the 12 June demonstration, was summoned to court where she was questioned and informed that she was facing new charges in connection with the 4 March gathering.