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IRAN: Continuing crackdown against peaceful critics

Amnesty International is greatly concerned by new arrests and detentions in Iran targeting human rights activists, minority community activists and others peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association. Those detained in recent days include Iranian Azerbaijanis advocating a schools boycott and at least 10 people who sought to demonstrate against the imminent execution of four women. Meanwhile, a prominent human rights defender who has been detained without charge or trial for over 100 days has disclosed that he is being subjected to continuous pressure to “repent” by the Iranian authorities.

Amnesty International is calling on the Iranian authorities immediately to cease arrests and harassment of those peacefully exercising their rights, including human rights defenders, and to ensure that all persons in detention are protected from torture or other ill-treatment.

Clampdown on Iranian Azerbaijanis

More than 15 members of the Iranian Azerbaijani community are reported to have been detained in recent days in connection with a call for students to boycott schools on the first day of the new academic year - 1 Mehr (which this year fell on 23 September 2006). Similar boycott calls have been made in previous years. Those detained include **Esedullah Selimi**, 52, who was reportedly arrested on 9 September 2006 while travelling to Tabriz and in possession of leaflets about planned demonstrations in support of a boycott, and then taken to an Intelligence Ministry detention facility in Tabriz. Others, including **Iskender Mirza'i** and **Mehdi Vahidi**, both from Naqadeh (Sulduz), reportedly arrested on 14 September, and **Eli Sediq Beyreq**, reportedly arrested on 15 September in Tabriz, are said to have been detained for distributing leaflets about the planned demonstrations. Other prominent activists who were arrested and released after previous mass demonstrations by the Azerbaijani community in May 2006 also have been detained. They include **Chengiz Bekhtaver**, **Gholamreza Emani** and **Hassan Ark** (also known as Hasan Ali Hajabollu) (see Urgent Action 151/2006, AI Index MDE 13/055/2006 and Public Statement Iran: Authorities should exercise restraint in policing Babek Castle gathering and address human rights violations against Iranian Azeri Turks, AI Index MDE 13/074/2006). Three brothers belonging to the **Evezpoor** family were reportedly arrested at their home in Tabriz in the early hours of 21 September: **Mostafa**, 25, **Morteza**, and **Mohammad Reza Evezpoor**, aged 14, were all detained previously in April 2006 (see Urgent Action 120/06 MDE 13/047/2006 and follow-up MDE 13/068/2006), when Mohammad Reza Evezpoor was reportedly tortured during his three days in detention. **Fereydun Mehdipour** and **Mohammad Hossein Pourghorban** were reportedly arrested on 23 September in Oromieh (Urmu). Their place of detention is unknown. There are also unconfirmed reports that some demonstrators may have been injured by Iranian security forces in Oromieh.

Ali Akbar Mousavi-Kho'ini

On 21 September, the Iranian authorities permitted prisoner of conscience Ali Akbar Mousavi-Kho'ini to attend a memorial gathering for his father forty days after the latter's death. This was the first time that he had been allowed out of Evin Prison, where he is detained in Section 209, since he was arrested on 12 June during a demonstration in Tehran calling for legal reforms to end discrimination against women in Iran (see Urgent Action 181/06, AI Index MDE 13/075/2006). At the memorial ceremony, during which he was heavily guarded, he is reported to have had visible bruising and a wound on his head and to have complained of ill-treatment in detention. He is reported to have said: "Tell everybody that I am under pressure and they interrogate me about five times a day," and to have complained that he was subject to both mental and physical ill-treatment, stating "I sleep with handcuffs and shackles on my feet every night and they have deprived me of every facility". He said that he was under pressure to write a letter of repentance to state officials expressing regret for his past actions. After the memorial he was returned to Evin Prison. He has not been permitted access to his lawyer since his arrest, and has had only limited access to his family.

Ali Akbar Mousavi-Kho'ini, a former student leader and former member of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, the *Majles* (Iran's parliament), is also the Head of the Alumni Association of Iran (*Sazman-e Danesh Amukhtegan-e Iran-e Eslami [Advar-e Tahkim-e Vahdaf]*), which he helped found in 2000. This organization, whose membership is open to graduates of Iranian universities, has been active in promoting democracy and human rights in Iran. During his term in parliament he was an active advocate of human rights, and highlighted the cases of imprisoned students and political prisoners, including by inspecting prisons and illegal detention centres.

Anti-death penalty arrests

On 24 September at least 10 people were detained while demonstrating peacefully outside the United Nations office in Tehran. They were protesting against the expected imminent execution of several women, including Kobra Rahmanpour, Fatemeh Haghighat-pajouh, Nazanin Fathehi and Shahla Jahed. Those arrested are reported to have included **Shahin Zaynali** and **Ali Davoudi**, both students at Esfahan University, but as yet this is not confirmed. Those arrested may have been taken to Police Station 128 in Gholhak and may have been released later in the day after signing undertakings about their future actions. Amnesty International has issued Urgent Actions on behalf of all these women currently under sentence of death.

Amnesty International's concerns

Amnesty International is concerned that many, if not all, of those whose cases are reported here appear to have been detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression and association, in which case they should be released immediately and unconditionally. Otherwise they should be released unless they are charged with a recognizably criminal offence and brought to trial promptly and fairly. They should be granted immediate and regular access to the outside world, including lawyers and family members. The Iranian authorities should end the practice of harassing those peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression and association.

Amnesty International is also concerned that those detained may be at risk of torture or ill-treatment. It is repeating its calls for the immediate and unconditional release of Ali Akbar Mousavi-Kho'ini, and for a prompt and impartial investigation into his claims that he is undergoing torture or other ill-treatment in Evin Prison in order to force him to write a letter of repentance.

Background

Iranian Azerbaijanis, who live mainly in the north-west of Iran, and who speak Azerbaijani Turkic, have over the past 15 years or so been demanding that the Iranian authorities respect their right to be educated in the medium of their own language. Article 15 of the Iranian Constitution permits "*the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools... in addition to Persian*".

Under international law, persons belonging to minorities have the right to use their own language, in

private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination. States cannot deny the right to use one's own language.

While the state provides education in the state's official language(s) for the majority population, members of minorities have a right to establish and maintain schools where education is provided in their own language, provided that they conform with the minimum educational standards laid down by the state. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children. This includes the right to choose for their children institutions other than those established and maintained by the public authorities.

State authorities should take positive measures: (a) so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue; (b) in order to encourage knowledge of the language of the minorities existing within their territory.

Mass demonstrations broke out in towns and cities in north-west Iran following the publication on 12 May 2006 of a cartoon in the state-owned daily newspaper, *Iran*, which offended many in the Iranian Azerbaijani community. The Iranian authorities reportedly used excessive force to disperse demonstrators, including beatings and lethal gunfire. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of demonstrators were reportedly detained. Most have since been released, but some are reported to have been tried and sentenced to imprisonment or flogging.