

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: MDE 13/135/2007 (Public)
News Service No: 223
16 November 2007

Iran: Amnesty International urges immediate and unconditional release of Sohrab Razzaghi

Amnesty International today said that it had written to the Head of the Judiciary in Iran, Ayatollah Hashemi Shahroudi, urging the immediate and unconditional release of Dr Sohrab Razzaghi, the Director of Iranian Civil Society Organizations Training and Research Center (ICTRC) (Koneshgaran Davtalab) (also known as Volunteer Actors Institute), whom the organization considers to be a prisoner of conscience. Dr Razzaghi was arrested on 24 October 2007 and is held in Section 209 of Evin Prison in Tehran, a section under the control of the Ministry of Intelligence.

ICTRC is a non-governmental organization (NGO) founded in 2002, which provides capacity-building support for Iranian civil society organizations, promotes greater access to information, promotes enhancement of the situation of women and children in connection with the Millennium Development Goals, and seeks to raise public awareness of human rights within Iran.

In March 2007, Iranian security forces closed the offices of the ICTRC, froze its bank accounts and confiscated computer equipment and documents. They also accompanied Sohrab Razzaghi to his home, where other documents were confiscated. Since then, occasional government statements in Iran have accused NGOs and wider civil society in Iran of promoting political change through a "soft revolution" in Iran. For example, Minister of Intelligence Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejeie, on 10 April 2007, publicly accused the womens' movement and student campaigners of being part of an enemy conspiracy for a "soft subversion" of the government in Iran. Some newspaper articles have made similar arguments and have specifically referred to the role of Hivos as an international donor in this regard. Sohrab Razzaghi has publicly criticised the increasing restrictions placed by the government of President Ahmadinejad on civil society in Iran and has stated that he regards financial aid from legal and legitimate sources abroad as a positive measure for Iranian civil society, providing it is made on the basis of equal partnership and that the aid is given in a transparent manner.

Academics and journalists, including some with dual nationality, have been detained in 2007 and interrogated about their writings and activities, which the authorities have claimed have been intended as part of this "soft subversion". Ali Farahbakhsh, a journalist specialising in economic issues, was released in October 2007 after 11 months in detention. He had been arrested in November 2006 when he returned from a conference in Thailand, on government and the media, organised by Thai NGOs. Sentenced to three years' imprisonment after conviction of "espionage" and "receiving money from foreigners", this was reduced to 16 months on appeal and he was then granted an early conditional release. Haleh Esfandiari and Kian Tajbaksh, Iranian academics who hold US citizenship, were both detained in May and spent several months in detention. They were accused of "acting against national security by [spreading] propaganda against the system."

Since his arrest, Sohrab Razzaghi has not been allowed to meet family members or his lawyer, although he is believed to have been permitted to telephone his family on several occasions. In a meeting with family members on 12 November 2007, the judge in charge of his case suggested that a release order allowing Sohrab Razzaghi's release on bail was likely to be issued within a week. Since his arrest, other board and staff members of the ICTRC have been summoned for questioning about the ICTRC and their roles within it, although none has yet been arrested.

