

URGENT ACTION

HUNGER-STRIKING LABOUR RIGHTS ACTIVIST AT RISK

Labour rights activist Sepideh Gholian has been on hunger strike since 23 July 2019 in protest at the ill-treatment of her family and dire conditions in Shahr-e Rey prison near Tehran. Her health has deteriorated sharply, leaving her too weak to walk. The trial of Sepideh Gholian and another labour rights activist, Esmail Bakhshi, has been scheduled for 3 August. They must be released immediately and unconditionally.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USING THIS MODEL LETTER

Prosecutor General of Tehran Ali Alghasi Mehr
Shahr-e Rey prison
Tehran-Varamin Highway, Gharchak, Iran

Dear Mr Alghasi Mehr,

Labour rights activist Sepideh Gholian has been on hunger strike since 23 July 2019 in protest at the ill-treatment of her family by prison officials as well as dire conditions in Shahr-e Rey prison, where she is held. She is experiencing dizziness, serious blood pressure drops and extreme weakness, leaving her too weak to walk. She is also throwing up stomach acids. On 26 July, she was transferred to the prison medical clinic after she lost consciousness. She subsequently said that the prison nurse had verbally abused her and that she would no longer go to the clinic. The authorities have asked her to sign a note stating that she is rejecting medical care voluntarily.

On 23 July, Sepideh Gholian's family drove for 13 hours from Khuzestan province in southern Iran to Tehran to visit her after a month without seeing her. At the prison, prison officials yelled at her parents, insulted them and subjected them to searches that they deemed excessive. Later in the visitation room, the officials also yelled at Sepideh Gholian in front of her family saying that she had not covered her hair and body properly. The tension escalated after she objected to the abuse. In response, the officials ended the visit, just five minutes after it had started, forcibly taking Sepideh Gholian away and leaving her parents shaking and in tears. She subsequently started a hunger strike in protest. In a letter dated 24 July, she wrote that her hunger strike is also in protest at the "horrific" conditions of Shahr-e Rey prison. She referred to the constant threats against inmates by prison staff, risks to prisoners' life, insanitary conditions and frequent water outages. Other complaints from this prison include overcrowding, extreme heat due to lack of proper air conditioning facilities, salty water unsuitable for drinking and inedible food.

The trial of Sepideh Gholian and fellow labour rights activist Esmail Bakhshi is due to take place before a Revolutionary Court in Tehran on 3 August. They are facing spurious national security charges, stemming directly from their participation in peaceful protests by workers over unpaid wages at Haft Tappeh sugar cane company in Khuzestan province and their outspoken statements that they were tortured after their first arrest in November 2018.

I urge you to release Sepideh Gholian and Esmail Bakhshi immediately and unconditionally as they are prisoners of conscience targeted solely for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Pending their release, please ensure that they can receive regular visits from their families and lawyers, and that Sepideh Gholian receives adequate health care, in compliance with medical ethics, including the principles of confidentiality, autonomy and informed consent. Please also take immediate steps to improve conditions at Shahr-e Rey prison based on international law and standards and allow international monitors to conduct inspection visits.

Yours sincerely,

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Sepideh Gholian and Esmail Bakhshi were violently rearrested by ministry of intelligence officials in Ahvaz, Khuzestan province, on 20 January, as apparent reprisal for speaking out about the torture they said they suffered in custody during their detention in November and December 2018. Sepideh Gholian was held in Sepidar prison and Esmail Bakhshi in Sheyban prison, both in Ahvaz until 28 April 2019, when they were transferred to Evin prison. On 3 June 2019, Sepideh Gholian was moved to Shahr-e Rey prison in the city of Varamin, near Tehran. They have since been charged with several national security offences including “membership of a group with the purpose of disrupting national security”, “gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security”, “spreading propaganda against the system”, “publishing lies for the purpose of disturbing public opinion” and “disrupting public order”. The charges stem solely from their participation in peaceful protests by workers at Haft Tappeh sugar cane company in Khuzestan province over grievances concerning unpaid wages and from their outspoken statements that they were tortured.

The safety and wellbeing of Sepideh Gholian is at a serious risk in Shahr-e Rey prison, where women accused or convicted of serious violent crimes are held in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. There are frequent reports from the facility of assaults against inmates both by other inmates and prison staff, as well as a prevalence of mental health issues, self-harm among prisoners and rampant drug use. The prison water is reportedly salty and unsuitable for drinking, leaving prisoners with no option but to purchase overpriced containers of drinking water from the prison shop. Prison meals are described as inedible and most prisoners choose to purchase their food from the prison shop, which mainly consists of canned products. Prisoners generally receive financial assistance from their families or work in prison to purchase water and food. Other common complaints include frequent power outages, a lack of proper ventilation or air conditioning facilities, filthy and insufficient bathroom facilities, very low water pressure in the showers, and a severe shortage of beds (meaning many prisoners have to sleep on the floor). Prisoners are also denied access to adequate medical care, leading to the prevalence of contagious diseases including tuberculosis and infectious hepatitis. Under international law as reflected in the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), prison authorities must provide prisoners with food of adequate nutritional value, as well as drinking water and clean and sanitary conditions of detention.

Sepideh Gholian and Esmail Bakhshi were first arrested on 18 November 2018 after attending a peaceful protest in front of the governor's office in Shush, Khuzestan, over grievances concerning the unpaid wages of workers at Haft Tappeh sugar cane company. Following their release on bail in mid-December, they revealed publicly that they had suffered torture at the hands of security police and intelligence officials, in both Shush and Ahvaz. They said they had been repeatedly beaten, slammed against a wall and shoved to the ground, humiliated with sexual insults, and threatened with flogging, sexual violence and murder. The Iranian authorities initially responded by promising to investigate the torture allegations. However, within days, key state officials, including the head of the judiciary, the country's chief prosecutor and the head of the president's office, made statements claiming that the allegations of torture were false and threatened to file a complaint against Esmail Bakhshi for bringing the Islamic Republic system into disrepute ([MDE 13/9745/201](#)).

On 19 January 2019, just a day before Esmail Bakhshi and Sepideh Gholian were arrested, a state TV station broadcasted the “confessions” that they had said were obtained through torture and other ill-treatment. In the videos, the activists “confess” to colluding with Marxist and Communist groups outside Iran to orchestrate the overthrow of the system through organizing strikes and demonstrations. Esmail Bakhshi told Amnesty International that, before filming the “confessions”, his interrogators had combed his hair, shaved his face and given him the script. He said the authorities would stop recording and yell at him when they thought his facial expressions did not convey “enough regret”. Sepideh Gholian said that the pressure on her to “confess” was so intense that, during her interrogations, she would scream and shiver uncontrollably and scratch her face. By extracting and broadcasting forced confessions, the Iranian authorities flagrantly violate fair trial rights, including the right to remain silent during interrogations and the presumption of innocence.

The trial of Esmail Bakhshi and Sepideh Gholian is due to take place before Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran on 3 August. Another labour rights activist, Ali Nejati, and four journalists, Sanaz Alahyari, Amirhossein Mohammadifar, Amir Amirgholi and Asal Mohammadi, are defendants in the same trial. Ali Nejati, the former chair and a current member of Haft Tappeh labour syndicate, was arrested on 29 November 2018 and released on bail on 28 January 2019. The four journalists work at an online magazine called *Gam*, which reports on social justice issues, including labour rights. Amir Amirgholi, Sanaz Alahyari and Amirhossein Mohammadifar have been detained in Tehran's Evin prison since January 2019. Asal Mohammadi was arrested on 8 December 2018 and released on bail on 5 January 2019. The four journalists are facing trial on spurious national security charges brought solely in connection with their reporting on the protests of workers at Haft Tappeh sugar cane company in Khuzestan ([MDE 13/0639/2019](#)).

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Persian or English

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 11 September 2019

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Sepideh Gholian (she/her) and Esmail Bakhshi (he/him)

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/9745/2019/en/>