

URGENT ACTION

ABUSE OF JAILED ACTIVIST MUST STOP

Imprisoned labour rights activist Sepideh Gholian and her family are suffering constant abuse and harassment by ministry of intelligence officials and prison authorities. Sepideh Gholian and fellow activist Esmail Bakhshi have been in prison since January 2019 in connection with their participation in peaceful protests. There are concerns about Sepideh Gholian's health following a five-day hunger strike from 20 to 25 October, which she carried out in protest at the ill-treatment of herself and her family and dire conditions in Shahr-e Rey prison. Sepideh Gholian and Esmail Bakhshi are prisoners of conscience and must be released immediately and unconditionally.

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

Head of the Judiciary Ebrahim Raisi
C/o Permanent Mission of Iran to the UN
Chemin du Petit-Saconnex 28
1209 Geneva, Switzerland

Dear Mr Raisi,

Labour rights activist **Sepideh Gholian** and her family are suffering from constant abuse and harassment by ministry of intelligence officials and prison authorities in Shahr-e Rey prison, where she is held in dire conditions.

On 20 October, she went on hunger strike after she learned that her sister **Samaneh Gholian** had been arbitrarily arrested and detained by ministry of intelligence officials in the city of Ahvaz simply for being Sepideh Gholian's sister. Samaneh Gholian was released on 22 October following hours of intense interrogations. Sepideh Gholian ended her hunger strike on 25 October after the head of Shahr-e Rey prison paid her a visit and apparently promised to address her grievances concerning the ill-treatment of herself and her family as well as the dire conditions of Shahr-e Rey prison, which include unsanitary facilities, salty water unsuitable for drinking, inedible food and insect-infestation. During her hunger strike, she lost consciousness several times and experienced vision disturbances and slurred speech.

In an audio recording leaked from inside prison on 24 October, Sepideh Gholian explains, in a shaky voice choked with tears, that prison officials have made her life in prison "suffocating" and "unbearable", constantly subjecting her to bullying, insults and threats, preventing her from speaking to her cellmates, and intimidating and abusing her family during prison visits. She also complains about the constant harassment and intimidation of her family members by ministry of intelligence officials in Ahvaz. She is heard crying and saying, "I cannot bear this any longer. I want people to know what suffering they [the authorities] are inflicting on us in prison... I am exhausted. I do not know what else to do. I want a delegation from the judiciary to come to the prison and see what suffering is being inflicted on me and other prisoners."

Sepideh Gholian and fellow labour rights activist **Esmail Bakhshi** have been in prison since January 2019 in connection with their participation in peaceful protests and for publicly complaining that they were tortured after their first arrest in November 2018. In September 2019, Sepideh Gholian was sentenced to 18 years in prison and Esmail Bakhshi to 13 and a half years in prison and 74 lashes on spurious national security charges. If upheld on appeal, each of them will have to serve seven years of their prison sentences.

I urge you to:

- **Ensure that Sepideh Gholian and Esmail Bakhshi are released immediately and unconditionally and their convictions and sentences are quashed as they are prisoners of conscience targeted solely for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly;**
- **Pending their release, please ensure that Sepideh Gholian and her family are protected from ill-treatment and can have regular visits together without harassment and undue interference;**
- **Ensure that their allegations of ill-treatment by ministry of intelligence and prison officials are effectively investigated and that anyone suspected of responsibility are brought to justice in fair trials.**

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Sepideh Gholian and Esmail Bakhshi were violently arrested by ministry of intelligence officials in Ahvaz, Khuzestan province, on 20 January 2019, as apparent reprisal for speaking out about the torture they said they suffered in custody during their first 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. In September 2019, Sepideh Gholian was sentenced, following an unfair trial before Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, to 18 years in prison, consisting of seven years for “gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security”, one and a half years for “spreading propaganda against the system”, two and a half years for “publishing lies”, and seven years for “membership of an illegal group” referring to her work with an online magazine, Gam, which reports on labour rights. Esmail Bakhshi was similarly sentenced to 74 lashes 13 and a half years in prison, consisting of seven years for “gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security”, two years for “insulting the Supreme Leader”, two years for “publishing lies”, one and a half years for “spreading propaganda against the system” and one and a half years and 74 lashes for “disrupting public order”. If upheld on appeal, Sepideh Gholian and Esmail Bakhshi have to serve seven years of their sentences, based on article 134 of the penal code, which provides that when an individual has been convicted of multiple charges, each incurring a separate prison sentence, they will have to serve the single lengthiest sentence.

The safety and wellbeing of Sepideh Gholian is at a serious risk in Shahr-e Rey prison, where women 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. Prison meals are described as inedible. Other common complaints include frequent power outages, a lack of proper ventilation or air conditioning facilities, filthy and insufficient bathroom facilities, insect infestation, 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. 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 Bakhshand 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 (please see Urgent Action: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/9745/2019/en/>).

On 19 January 2019, just a day before Esmail Bakhshi and Sepideh Gholian were arrested, a state TV station broadcast the “confessions” that they had said were obtained through torture and other ill-treatment. 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 the 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.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Persian or English

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 6 December 2019

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

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

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE13/0814/2019/en/>