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Iran must free detained human rights lawyer

The Iranian authorities must immediately release one of Iran's most prominent human rights lawyers, Abdolfattah Soltani, who was arrested on Saturday, Amnesty International said today.

Soltani, a co-founder of the Centre for Human Rights Defenders along with Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi and others, was arrested at a Prosecutor's Office in Tehran. His wife told the media that four security officials then escorted him to his home, where they confiscated computers and documents before taking him away.

"Abdolfattah Soltani is one of the bravest human rights defenders in Iran. He has represented defendants in some of the most controversial human rights cases for over a decade, refusing to bow to pressure from the Iranian authorities," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Director. "Now he is again paying the price for that commitment".

Soltani has been arrested on a number of occasions in the past. In 2005, he spent seven months behind bars, but was eventually acquitted of all charges. He also spent two months in detention in 2009. Amnesty International has previously recognised him as a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for his work as a lawyer and defending human rights.

Abroad, his work has won him international recognition. In 2008 the German city of Nuremberg gave him a prestigious human rights award. But a travel ban imposed by the Iranian authorities prevented him from travelling there to receive it.

However, in Iran, he and fellow members of the Centre for Human Rights Defenders have been penalized by the authorities who forcibly closed their organisation in 2008 and carried out a string of arrests. This clampdown intensified after disputed presidential elections in 2009. Mohammad Seyfzadeh, a co-founder of the Centre, is currently serving a two-year prison term for his role in founding it.

Other human rights organisations whose members have been targeted include the Committee for the Defence of Political Prisoners in Iran, Human Rights Activists in Iran and the Committee of Human Rights Reporters.

Another prominent human rights lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh, was sentenced to 11 years in prison earlier this year. Arrested on 4 September 2010, the charges against her included "acting against national security, including membership of the Centre for Human Rights Defenders" – although she denied ever having been a member of the Centre.

She and a number of other imprisoned human rights lawyers, including Mohammad Seyfzadeh, Javid Houtan Kiyan and Mostafa Daneshju, are recognised by Amnesty International as prisoners of conscience.

"The continuing harassment and arrest of Iranian defence lawyers is completely unacceptable." said

Malcolm Smart. “Such actions not only directly violate their rights, but those of their clients, who are finding it increasingly difficult to find legal representation because of the deterrent effect of such arrests.”