

# Urgent Action

# In Focus

An insight into the stories behind UAs

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## Helping to break the Silence: Urgent Actions on Iran

A wall of silence surrounds a great many human rights violations in Iran. The country's authorities continue to deny access to Amnesty International's researchers. Perpetrators of human rights violations are rarely, if ever, held to account within the country.

Yet for decades now, members of the Urgent Action network have been helping to break this silence, showing that the world is watching and helping to protect individuals from some of the most severe human rights violations.

"Over the years, appeals by members of the UA network have come to be seen by victims of human rights violations and their families as one of the most effective means of tackling urgent human rights concerns," Amnesty International's researcher on Iran reports.

"We learn about the impact of our work through Iran's press and contacts in the country, including lawyers, journalists, human rights defenders, political rights activists and their supporters outside the country. From these sources, we know that some Urgent Actions have had a dramatic impact. Several have also resulted in press coverage within Iran, and reference in parliament to the issues raised."

In the past year AI has issued over 20 Urgent Actions on Iran. The following examples – a student advocate of



Amir Abbas Fakhrafar © Private

political change; a woman human rights defender; a vulnerable woman sentenced to death, possibly having acted in self-defence; and a student victim of torture – are representative of these. The Urgent Actions usually concern prisoners of conscience, and are usually issued following arrest, during periods of interrogation, or when they are held incommunicado, which can be at any stage of their time in custody. In practice, prosecutors can hold prisoners indefinitely, incommunicado, before they are charged.

We have evidence that huge volumes of our appeals are getting through - in August 2003, the Secretary General of the Iranian Human Rights Commission said that the organization had received over 12,000 letters from people outside

Iran who were concerned about aspects of the human rights situation in the country. The majority of these letters would have come from members of the UA network.

Members of the Urgent Action network will be aware that there is not always good news. Yet the cases below are typical of many others which have met with positive developments.

### **"Please let Amnesty know that we gave your son leave from prison": the case of Amir Abbas Fakhravar**

Freelance journalist Amir Abbas Fakhravar was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment on defamation charges in November 2002, because of comments about Iran's political leadership he was alleged to have made in his book *Inja Chah Nist* (This Place is Not a Ditch). In March 2004 he was moved to a detention facility outside the official prison system, under the control of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, where he was subjected to what Iranians have called "white torture", a technique of extreme sensory deprivation which appears to be designed to weaken the prisoner by causing persistent and unjustified suffering amounting to torture. (see Further Information on UA 88/03, MDE 13/009/2004, 13 February 2004)

His cell there had no windows, and was entirely coloured creamy white, as were his clothes. At meal times, he was reportedly given white rice on white, disposable paper plates and if he needed to use the toilet, he had to put a white slip of paper under the door of the cell to alert guards, who reportedly had footwear designed to muffle any sound. He was forbidden to speak to anyone. Amnesty International has been told that "the silence is deafening".

On or around 21 March, Iran's New Year

or *No Rouz*, he was granted 19 days' leave. In a conversation with a contact following his release, he thanked Amnesty International for the most recent appeal from the UA network. When his father was collecting the paperwork for his release, the judge reportedly said to him, "Mr. Fakhravar, please also let Amnesty know that we gave your son leave from prison." Amnesty International will continue to monitor Amir Abbas Fakhravar's situation closely.

### **Prison conditions improve after UA issued**



**Mehrangiz Kar**  
© Heinrich Böll Institute

Sometimes the impact of a UA is less dramatic, but still significant for the prisoner concerned. On 29 April 2000, lawyer and human rights defender Mehrangiz Kar was

detained after she returned from Berlin, where she had taken part in an academic and cultural conference on political and social reform in Iran (UA 103/00, MDE 13/20/00, 3 May 2000). All the other Iranians involved - including two translators who did not attend the event, but helped prepare for it - were also detained, some for up to a year, before unfair trials that saw several jailed as prisoners of conscience, including student leader Ali Afshari, journalist and cleric Hojjatoleslam Yousefi Eshkevari, (UA 236/00, MDE 13/22/00, 9 August 2000 and MDE 13/29/00, 17 October 2000) and journalist Akbar Ganji (EXTRA 43/00 (MDE 13/07/00, 25 April 2000 and follow-ups MDE 13/31/00, 10 November 2000; MDE 13/003/2001, 16 January

2001 and MDE 13/022/2001, 29 June 2001).

Tehran's judicial authorities took this action because the event had been disrupted by Europe-based Iranian political groups, who staged noisy demonstrations, which were filmed and broadcast on Iranian television. Elements within the Iranian judiciary appeared to consider attendance at the conference to have been insulting to Iran and "harmful to national security".

Mehrangiz Kar spent 52 days in Evin prison. She later wrote in the Iranian monthly, *Payam-e Emrouz*: "The floor of the cell was covered in a carpet of filth, and the dried vomit of the previous prisoners. There were two dirty blankets [and] I wrapped myself with my *chador* (*large veil used to cover the entire body*). The metallic toilet, with its large opening, small base and moveable lid was indeed infectious. Dried dirt was stuck to the inside of the bowl. It clearly showed that there was no thought of cleaning and disinfecting toilets after a prisoner leaves the cell. Whenever I felt really nauseated from crawling all over the dirty surface of the cell, I would close the lid of that toilet and sit on it and massage my feet." In the same article she wrote that "a woman prisoner sang with a beautiful voice every night at four o'clock in the morning and in this way scattered the fragrance of life all over the prison wing."

In February 2001 she was allowed to leave Iran to seek medical treatment for breast cancer, and met with the Iran research team at the IS. With them she worked out that the occasions when the prison authorities cleaned the cell she was sharing with another prisoner of conscience had all followed appeals on her behalf from the UA network and other international organisations. Mehrangiz Kar is still receiving medical treatment in the United States. She is now also campaigning on behalf of her husband, prisoner of conscience Siamak Pourzand (UA 298/01, MDE 13/046/2001,

27 November 2001 and follow-ups, MDE 13/014/2001, 12 December 2001; MDE 13/001/2002, 1 February 2002; MDE 13/007/2002, 10 May 2002; MDE 13/011/2002, 31 July 2002 and MDE 13/022/2004, 6 April 2004).

## **UAs shine spotlight on Death Penalty**

The UA network's interventions on death penalty cases, especially those involving women, have resulted in controversy and public debate in Iran, some of it in parliament.

On 15 December 2003, we took action on the case of Kobra Rahmanpour (UA 364/03, MDE 13/041/2003), whose death sentence was reportedly scheduled to be carried out the following month. She had been arrested, reportedly on 5 November 2000, for killing her mother-in-law. Despite a plea that she was acting in self-defence after her mother-in-law tried to attack her with a kitchen knife, she was sentenced to death by Branch 1608 of Tehran's Criminal Court, on or around 1 January 2002. In the last week of December 2003, as appeals from the UA were attracting increasing attention, members of the "women's caucus" in Iran's parliament raised concern about her case. Nevertheless, on 30 December 2003, the Unit for Enforcement of Judgements told Kobra Rahmanpour's lawyer that his client would be executed in Evin Prison the following day.

Her family and the victim's were summoned to Evin Prison to attend the event. According to press reports on 1 January, they all arrived at around 5am, when Kobra Rahmanpour's mother made a final, unsuccessful plea to the family of the victim to pardon her daughter. Inside the prison Kobra Rahmanpour had been informed that she was going to be executed, and had started to prepare. She had been given permission to telephone her family, but there was no

answer: they had already set out for the prison.

After a long wait, the prison authorities eventually called the victim's family and Kobra's lawyer inside and told them there were no executions scheduled for that day. Upon leaving Evin, Kobra's lawyer told reporters that there had been an error in the communication of the order and the prison authorities were not prepared to execute her. Later that day, the judge in charge of the Unit for Enforcement of Judgements confirmed to a reporter from an internet news site, the Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA), that the execution was cancelled because prison authorities were not prepared, and that the head of the prison had been summoned to account for this negligence. According to press reports, the prison authorities had attempted to prepare for the execution at short notice, and lacked a pair of handcuffs to transport Kobra (most of this was detailed in MDE 13/002/2004, an update issued 09 January 2004). Perhaps the real reason for the delay was worldwide pressure which started with the UA network, news of which spread quickly to other activists.

judiciary. The "organizations" are, in fact, overwhelmingly UA network members, whose intervention must be seen as contributing to the stay of execution.

In a letter dated 3 February 2004, the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in London stated that, "following a meeting of the relatives of Mrs Rahmanpour with Ayatollah Shahroudi, the Head of the Judiciary, he issued instructions on the stay of the execution to allow adequate time to obtain the consent of the heirs to forego their right to retribution in kind. Accordingly, the judgement of death sentence is precluded from being executed upon the order from the Head of Judiciary until further notice". Amnesty International welcomes this clarification from the authorities. The letter also states that all legal proceedings on the case have been completed, and therefore the sentence can only be commuted if the victim's heirs forgo their right to retribution and ask instead for the payment of "blood money" (*diyeh*) (see MDE13/011/2004, 17 February 2004). The authorities are pressing the victim's family to do this, and Kobra Rahmanpour remains in prison.



Excerpt from *Iran* newspaper, describing case of Kobra Rahmanpour

On 6 January, the Persian-language Tehran daily, *Iran*, carried a report stating that 34 "international human rights organizations" had written to the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) calling for clemency and a review of Kobra Rahmanpour's case. The Secretary General of the IHRC, which is an institution affiliated with the state but with operational independence, stated that they had submitted the letters to the

## Student demonstrator granted asylum

More often than not, the Iran research team can only surmise that a given UA had a positive impact, as in the case of Mehran Mirabdolbaghi-Kashani. He was one of hundreds of people arrested after widespread student demonstrations concerning the closure of the newspaper *Salam* (Hello, or Peace) which started on 8 July 1999. Long after the event, AI was told that on 13 July 1999 around 10 officials, possibly from the Ministry of Intelligence, had arrived at his house and held him at gunpoint while they searched the building. He was reportedly then taken to an unknown location in south Tehran, near the Tohid detention centre, and beaten repeatedly. On 23 July, he was allowed to telephone his mother. A

security official reportedly interrupted the call, saying, "God will arrange everything".

On 16 August 1999, members of his family were reportedly permitted to see him, and on 15 September 1999, AI learned that he might have been tortured. Mehran Mirabdolbaghi-Kashani was reportedly later sentenced to nine years' imprisonment in a secret trial, where he had no access to legal representation. He later told AI that during the trial he was injected with a drug, which made him 'dozy' and semi-conscious for some time. He was moved to the Tohid detention centre, which has since been closed. After four to five months there, he was taken to Evin Prison. Possibly as a result of domestic and international interventions, including UA 160/99 (MDE 13/15/99, 9 July 1999) and its follow-ups (MDE 13/16/99, 13 July 1999 and MDE 13/24/99, 13 September 1999), he was released and in June 2002, several weeks after his release, he arrived in Europe and was given asylum.

"These cases show that we are having an impact," according to the Iran researcher. "Appeals by UA letter writers are getting through to the Iranian authorities. They are getting the message that human rights abuses are not acceptable, and that the world is watching."

For more details of the cases described above, please see:

Mehrangiz Kar: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGMDE130342000>

Amir Abbas Fakhravar: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGMDE130092004>

Ali Afshari:

<http://www.web.amnesty.org/web/wwa.nsf/51bea5ae7097c9fc80256ad40057cb66/4f1937aa339f523780256c3e00399118!OpenDocument>

Hojjatoleslam Yousefi Eshkevari: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/print/ENGMDE130292000>

Akbar Ganji: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/print/ENGMDE130222001>

Siamak Pourzand: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/print/ENGMDE130222004>

Kobra Rahmanpour:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE130412003?open&of=ENG-IRN;>

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE130022004?open&of=ENG-IRN;>

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE130112004?open&of=ENG-IRN>