

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

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### **Iran: Human Rights Defenders under attack- Amnesty International calls for the ban on leading independent human rights organization to be over-turned**

Amnesty International is alarmed at the continuing erosion in the human rights situation in Iran, highlighted by the announcement that the Centre for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR, in Persian, *Kanoon-e Modafean Hogooge Bashar*), co-founded by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi, has been banned.

The banning of the CDHR, and threats of arrest against its members should they continue their work, strikes at the heart of the struggle for human rights in Iran. The targeting of the CDHR is symbolic of the climate of intimidation and harassment endured by Iran's community of human rights defenders in the course of their work.

On 3 August, the Ministry of Interior announced that the CDHR had been banned. A statement by the Secretariat of the Committee for Article 10 of the Law on Party and Organization Activities said " .any activity under the name of *Kanoon-e Modafean Hogooge Bashar* is illegal and violators will be prosecuted accordingly".

The CDHR was established in 2002, by Shirin Ebadi. Its members include some of Iran's leading human rights defenders and lawyers. The CDHR has made an inestimable contribution to the development of a culture of human rights in Iran, and the efforts of other human rights defenders in Iran have been bolstered its work.

The CDHR has three stated roles, reporting violations of human rights in Iran; providing pro-bono legal representation to political prisoners; and support to the families of political prisoners. Its members have pursued high profile cases of impunity, and defended high profile victims of human rights violations. Lawyers for the CDHR represented the family of Zahra Kazemi, the Iranian-Canadian journalist who died in Evin prison in June 2003, and prisoner of conscience Akbar Ganji.

Like other human rights organizations in Iran, it has faced delays in its registration. The CDHR submitted documentation regarding its founding four years ago, but had not received a response, despite regulations that oblige the Ministry of Interior to respond within three months of an application.

Like other human rights defenders in Iran, the members of the CDHR have been subject to ongoing harassment and intimidation. For example, in July 2006, Abdolfattah Soltani was sentenced to five years imprisonment by Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in July 2006, convicted of "disclosing confidential documents" and "propaganda against the regime". He has also been deprived of social rights for five years, which would include practising law. Following the verdict, Abdolfattah Soltani said "my crime is accepting

political cases including cases of journalists, students, and two nuclear defendants . . . otherwise, I did not break the law. They are trying to treat me in a way so that no other lawyer would accept political case". Abdolfattah Soltani was imprisoned for over seven months, 43 days of which in solitary confinement, before he was released on bail in March 2006, pending trial.

The CDHR have declared their intention to continue their activities defending the human rights of Iranians. If members of the CDHR are arrested and imprisoned solely on account of these legitimate activities, Amnesty International would consider them prisoners of conscience, and campaign for their immediate and unconditional release.

In the face of a growing human rights crisis, Iran's human rights defenders need to be allowed to carry out their legitimate activities in defence of human rights.

Iran is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees the right to freedom of belief, expression and association. Amnesty International reminds the Iranian authorities of Article 12 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. This states that "Everyone has the right . . . to participate in peaceful activities against violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms." The Declaration requires states to "take all necessary measures to ensure the protection . . . against any violence, threats, retaliation, *de facto* or *de jure* adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration."

Amnesty International calls for the ban to be immediately rescinded. Rather than closure and persecution of the CDHR, Amnesty International calls on the Office of the Supreme Leader of Iran to grant recognition to those seeking to promote and protect human rights in Iran and to direct the judiciary, government and parliament to implement the provisions of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders into national law.

## **Background**

Human Rights defenders in Iran face severe limitations on their work. Iranian legislation severely restricts freedom of expression and association and human rights defenders often face reprisals for their work in the form of harassment, intimidation, attacks, detention, imprisonment and torture. Many are subject to travel bans that prevent them from leaving the country. The registration process for independent non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is complex and registration is frequently denied, leaving NGOs at risk of enforced closure. Few risk accepting foreign funding for fear of opening themselves up to charges of contact with, and support for, "hostile foreign organizations" or "espionage". For example, in January 2006 the Ministry of the Interior was said to be compiling a list of NGOs that allegedly received finance from "problematic internal and external sources aimed at overthrowing the system", some of which had received support from the office of former President Khatami. The Ministry of the Interior was said to be preparing measures to restrict their activities.