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Iran: Trial of Mohammad Reza Aghdam - Amnesty International appoints trial observer

Amnesty International has delegated the Syrian lawyer and human rights defender, Khalil Matouk to observe the trial of Mohammad Reza Aghdam.

Mohammad Reza Aghdam, an official of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence, has reportedly been charged in connection with the death in custody on 12 July 2003 of Zahra Kazemi, a dual Canadian-Iranian national.

Amnesty International has requested assistance from the Iranian authorities in facilitating the granting of a visa to Khalil Matouk and for him to be accredited to observe the trial but is awaiting response.

Amnesty International has repeatedly called for the establishment of an open and independent investigative mechanism with judicial powers to examine all facets of the death in custody of Zahra Kazemi.

Amnesty International believes that such a mechanism must have the power to summon witnesses, including members of the Office of the Tehran Chief Prosecutor, compel the disclosure of documents, ensure the protection of witnesses from harassment or intimidation, and develop mechanisms to prevent the recurrence of similar human rights violations in the future.

While welcoming the individual enquiries established by the government, parliament and other bodies, the organization believes that these lack the operational scope and legal power required to reach credible conclusions and recommendations.

Background

On 23 June 2003 Canadian-Iranian photojournalist Zahra Kazemi, 53, was arrested for taking photographs outside Evin prison, in an area where photography is prohibited. According to a government enquiry, Zahra Kazemi died as a result of a blow to her skull, while under guard at the Baghiyetollah (or Baghiyeta'zam) Hospital in Tehran on 12 July 2003. The report recommended that the case be examined by a "special independent investigator" from the judiciary and that public information should be "swift". On 29 July 2003 judicial officials confirmed that five individuals had been arrested in connection with the case, of which three are said to be from Tehran's judiciary and two from the Ministry of Intelligence. On 30 July 2003 a government spokesperson stated that Zahra Kazemi was murdered. Four of the individuals initially detained were later released.

Mohammad Reza Aghdam was charged in connection with the death in custody of Zahra Kazemi and on 2 October 2003, he appeared in court to plead not guilty to the charges, while further hearings were adjourned to permitted lawyers of the Kazemi family time to prepare their case.

Khalil Matouk is a lawyer and human rights defender, familiar with politically motivated criminal charges and trials before state security and criminal courts. Khalil Matouk is a founding member of a group of Syrian lawyers that provides representation and legal assistance for prisoners of conscience in the region and he has participated and contributed to numerous seminars and workshops covering various human rights topics including the promotion of human rights culture in the Arab region, and the International Criminal Court.

For more information concerning the death in custody of Zahra Kazemi, please see: *An independent inquiry must be opened into the death of Zahra Kazemi*, AI Index MDE 13/022/2003, 15 July 2003. It can be viewed at:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE130222003?open&of=ENG-IRN>

And: *Only an independent investigative body can serve justice and human rights*, AI Index MDE 13/026/2003, 1 August 2003, which can be viewed at:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE130222003?open&of=ENG-IRN>