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Prisoners' hunger strike puts the spotlight on denial of medical care in Iranian jails

The hunger strike staged by dozens of prisoners inside Iran's prisons put the spotlight on the deplorable prison conditions and the denial of medical care by the Iranian authorities. Amnesty International urges the authorities to immediately provide adequate medical care to all prisoners and to ensure that those needing specialized treatment are granted medical leave.

Political prisoners who seek medical leave to enable them to receive urgent or specialized medical care, as permitted under Iranian law, often see their requests arbitrarily rejected and appear to be routinely discriminated against by the prison administration.

Prominent human rights lawyer **Abdolfattah Soltani**, and three other political prisoners, **Amir Khosro Dalirsani**, **Mehdi Khodaei (Khodaie)**, and **Saeed Madani** started a "wet" hunger strike (taking water but not food) in Tehran's Evin Prison at the beginning of November to protest the lack of medical care, as well as the Iranian authorities' refusal to grant medical leave to some prisoners to receive specialized treatment outside prison.

They named, in a public letter, prisoners denied specialized medical treatment, including **Mohammad-Hassan Youssef Poursifi** who suffers from heart disease; **Esmail Barzegaar** who has been on 12 hunger strikes in protest at the prison authorities' neglect of his poor health; **Ahmad Daneshpour** who lost 20 kilos as a result of unspecified medical issues; **Hamid Naghibi** who has cancer; **Davoud Assadi** who requires surgery on his leg and hip; **Morteza Mohammadi** who suffers from mental illness and has previously received treatment in a mental health hospital; **Alireza Ahmadi** who requires knee surgery; **Nader Jani** who had been exposed to chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq war and needs ongoing treatment; and **Yashar Darashafaei** who suffers from back pain and is unable to walk. In their letter they also mention the poor health of **Mehdi Karroubi** and **Mir-Hossein Moussavi**, who have been under unofficial house arrest since February 2011.

They ended their hunger strike on 10 November 2013 following a collective request from dozens of other political prisoners, families of political prisoners, and human rights organizations. The men warned that they would resume their hunger strike if the treatment of sick prisoners did not improve.

Abdolfattah Soltani's daughter, Maede Soltani, has told Amnesty International that although her father had previously stated he was against the use of hunger strikes as a form of protest, he now feels that the gravity of the situation – the number and condition of sick prisoners in Evin Prison – is such that he and the other three men felt compelled to go on hunger strike as a way of raising awareness about the ongoing crisis.

Following news of the hunger strike, 80 prisoners from Raja'i Shahr Prison, north-west of Tehran, also embarked on a three-day hunger strike on 4 November 2013 in solidarity with the hunger strikers in Evin Prison.

Prison conditions in Iran are notoriously poor, and sometimes amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Poor conditions, including overcrowding, inadequate food and sanitation, in addition to the denial of adequate medical care, exacerbate prisoners' medical problems.

Many prisoners' requests for medical leave under Iranian prison regulations, even in very serious cases, are routinely denied.

Whether done purposely or by neglect, failing to provide adequate medical care to vulnerable prisoners is a breach of Iran's international human rights obligations. The denial of medical treatment may amount to a violation of the absolute prohibition against torture and other ill-treatment, including under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a party. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights also recognises the right of all persons to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners also states that prisoners who require specialist treatment must be transferred to specialist institutions or civil hospitals. Equipment and pharmaceutical supplies in prison medical facilities are required to be proper for the medical care and treatment of sick prisoners.

Iran's own prison regulations are also routinely flouted by prison and judicial officials. The regulations governing the administration of Iranian prisons stipulate that a prisoner suffering from a serious medical condition that cannot be treated inside prison, or whose condition will worsen if they stay in prison, should be granted medical leave in order to receive treatment.

Amnesty International has documented a number of other cases where sick prisoners have been denied adequate medical care, including medication, and have been refused medical leave, to which they are entitled to under Iranian prison regulations:

- Blogger and prisoner of conscience, [Hossein Ronaghi Maleki](#), is serving a 15-year prison sentence in Evin Prison and needs urgent medical care for injuries he says he sustained during torture and other ill-treatment in detention. He has had one kidney removed and needs ongoing specialized treatment on his remaining kidney that he cannot get in prison. Maleki has also launched a number of hunger strikes in protest at the authorities' refusal to grant him medical leave, their harsh treatment of political prisoners, and disregard for prisoners' welfare. He was transferred to Hasheminejad Hospital in Tehran on 4 November for three hours, where doctors said he has a kidney infection in his one remaining kidney, as well as a condition called Hydronephrosis, where the kidney become stretched and swollen as a result of a build-up of urine inside the kidney. His doctors said that he should not be in prison, warning that prison conditions will lead to a worsening of his health.
- Prisoner of conscience, [Reza Shahabi](#), serving a six-year sentence in Evin Prison for charges in connection with his trade union activities, has had chronic back pain since surgery was performed on his spine in May 2012. Although he has received injections from prison medical officials for the pain, he has not received the specialized medical care that he requires, without which he may suffer paralysis of the left side of his body.
- Blogger [Mohammad Reza Pourshajari](#), aged 53, also known by his pen name of Siamak Mehr, is serving a four-year sentence in Ghezel Hesar Prison in Karaj, north-west of Tehran, in connection with writings on his blog. He has suffered two heart attacks in prison and is in urgent need of medical care, including treatment for blockage in his arteries. The Iranian authorities are not providing him with such treatment and have also denied him medical leave to receive appropriate medical care outside the prison. The prison administration has also said that they will no longer provide the medicine he needs for his high blood sugar.

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