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IRAN: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNS UPSURGE IN EXECUTIONS

Amnesty International today condemned the rising number of executions in Iran and called on the Iranian authorities take immediate steps to prevent further executions. The call followed the news that two Iranians who were detained for seven years before being tried had been executed mainly on political charges after what appeared to have been an unfair trial, despite repeated appeals by the organization for clemency.

“It is outrageous that recorded executions in Iran should have more than doubled in 1996 at a time when the worldwide trend is to abolish the death penalty,” Amnesty International said. “It is even more unacceptable that executions are occurring after apparently unfair trials.”

The human rights organization recorded at least 110 executions in 1996, in contrast to about 50 recorded in 1995. However, the true figure may be much higher, as Amnesty International believes that many executions are never reported.

Hedayatollah Zendehtdel and Abolghasem Majd-Abkahi were reportedly hanged in Qasr Prison in Tehran on either 29 December 1996 or 1 January 1997. They had been sentenced to death in July 1996 after conviction of being “corrupt on earth”, a charge which usually carries the death penalty.

According to Iranian officials, they were accused of passing “classified military information to foreign agents; setting up a gang of financial corruption; embezzling public properties and bribery; collaboration and active involvement in providing fabricated documents; facilitating [the] illegal departure of people out of the country; extramarital relations with a number of women; drinking alcoholic beverages and arranging parties to use narcotic drugs”. Other accusations reportedly included working to restore Iran’s imperial family and attempting to smuggle arms into the country.

Four others were tried in the same case: Alireza Yazdanshenas, a former air force officer, was also sentenced to death, and is believed to have been executed previously; and the other three defendants received prison terms of between 7 to 23 years and between 110 and 200 lashes. Sheyda Khoramzadeh Esfahani, the wife of Abolghasem Majd-Abkahi, was also sentenced to death in a separate trial apparently in connection with the same case. She is believed to be at imminent risk of execution following the confirmation of her sentence by the Supreme Court.

Amnesty International believes that their trials may have been unfair. The organization received reports that Hedayatollah Zendehtdel and possibly others were subjected to torture during his detention. In addition, the independence of the judiciary in Iran is compromised under a 1994 law which transferred the responsibility of prosecution to judges. The United Nations Special Representative on Iran who attended part of a session of the trial of the six men stated in his subsequent report that: *“The judge played a much more active role and the lawyers a more passive role than in any trial [he had] attended elsewhere. Indeed [he] was left with the impression that the judge was clearly not a neutral party between the prosecution and the defence.”* There were also concerns that the defendants may not have been allowed to choose their own lawyers.

The Special Representative had sought to visit Hedayatollah Zendehtdel, but was denied access to him. He was also told by the President of the Independent Bar Association that seven-year pre-trial detention *“should not happen, that it would also be a violation of normal judicial process [and] would also be a violation of both legal and religious decrees and that the ‘system cannot detain a person for a long time on the basis of suspicion alone’”*.

The human rights organization is calling on the Iranian Government to ensure that political prisoners in Iran are afforded a fair trial, as laid down in Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights [ICCPR], to which Iran is a State Party. In addition, the 1984 Economic and Social Council [ECOSOC] Safeguards guaranteeing protection of the rights of those facing the death penalty make clear that the death penalty should only be implemented after trials which *at least* meet the standards of Article 14 of the ICCPR.

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