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IRAN: RELEASE DETAINED LABOUR RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

The Iranian authorities must immediately and unconditionally release labour rights activists arbitrarily detained solely for taking part in peaceful protests and strikes or otherwise peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, Amnesty International said on International Workers' Day.

In the past year, since International Workers' Day in 2018, Amnesty International has documented the arrests of hundreds of workers and other labour rights activists in the context of a campaign by the authorities to repress social unrest and public dissent. Courts have handed down prison sentences to dozens of them, in at least 38 cases compounding these by ordering those convicted to be flogged as well.

The Iranian authorities should also initiate impartial, independent and effective investigations into allegations that some labour rights activists, including Esmail Bakhshi and Sepideh Gholian, whose testimonies Amnesty International has documented in detail, have been tortured or otherwise ill-treated in detention in recent months. Anyone found responsible should be brought to justice in trials that meet international fair trial standards.

The organization renews its calls on the Iranian authorities to lift their unlawful ban on independent trade unions and allow workers to hold peaceful gatherings, including on International Workers' Day, and to exercise their right to form and join independent trade unions.

CRACKDOWN ON WORKERS

As the economic crisis in Iran has worsened over the past year, affected in part by the imposition of sanctions by the United States, workers in both the private and public sectors have taken to the streets in their thousands and gone on strike to call for better working conditions and protections by the government. Delays and non-payment of wages amidst high levels of inflation, skyrocketing living costs and poor working conditions have also provoked protests.

Instead of addressing the complaints of workers, however, the Iranian authorities have responded by arresting hundreds of them, including teachers, truck drivers and factory workers. They have summoned others for questioning, subjecting them to interrogations, threats of arrest, and other forms of harassment and intimidation. Dozens of workers have been sentenced to prison terms and flogging for taking part in peaceful protests and strikes and some have reported being subjected to torture and other ill-treatment, in clear contravention of international human rights law and standards.

The right to strike is protected by Article 8 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Iran is a party. The right to freedom of peaceful assembly is protected by Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is also a party. The right not to be subjected to torture or other inhumane and degrading treatment, as well as being protected by Article 7 of the same covenant, is considered a universally accepted principle of international law.

The security forces have violently dispersed peaceful protests by teachers calling for higher wages and better funding of the country's public education system. Since May 2018, the authorities have arrested around two dozen teachers following nationwide strikes; a number of them have been sentenced to prison terms, flogging and other penalties.

Hundreds of truck drivers have been arrested since the beginning of 2018 after taking part in peaceful nationwide strikes demanding better working conditions, higher wages and independent trade unions. In September and October 2018, in an apparent attempt to deter further strikes, the prosecutor general of Iran, Mohammad Ja'far Montazeri, and a number of other judiciary officials were quoted by Iranian media threatening the striking truck drivers with the death penalty.

Factory workers have also been targeted. In recent months, scores of steel workers in the city of Ahvaz, Khuzestan province, south-west Iran, have been arrested following weeks of strikes. Workers in the Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane Company in Khuzestan province who have taken part in peaceful protests and strikes over unpaid wages and other grievances such as the running of the company since it was privatized have also been subjected to arbitrary arrests. At least two have alleged torture and other ill-treatment in detention.

ARBITRARY DETENTION

Amnesty International has documented the arrests of hundreds of workers and other labour rights activists since International Workers' Day in 2018. At least 12 labour rights activists remain arbitrarily detained.

On 26 April 2019, the authorities raided a peaceful gathering of dozens of labour rights activists in a park in Tehran and arrested 12 individuals. Most were released the same day, but the authorities have continued to detain **Alireza Saghafi**, **Haleh Safarzadeh** and **Parvin Mohammadi**. It is unclear what charges, if any, the three activists are facing.

On 21 February 2019, teacher and labour rights activist **Omid Shahmohammadi** was sentenced to one year in prison by a Revolutionary Court in Sanandaj, Kurdistan province, in relation to his participation in nationwide strikes by teachers on 13 and 14 November 2018. According to the Human Rights Activists News Agency and the Coordination Council of Iranian Teacher Trade Associations, at least 14 teachers were arrested across the country in relation to the strike, some of whom face charges, while more than 30 others were summoned for questioning and at least 50 received threats from security and intelligence bodies.

Jafar Azimzadeh, the chair of the Free Union of Workers of Iran, was arrested on 29 January 2019 to finish serving the remainder of a prison sentence in Evin prison. He had been sentenced to six years' imprisonment in March 2015 after a Revolutionary Court in Tehran convicted him of "gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security" and "spreading propaganda against the system". His conviction was based solely on his peaceful trade union activities, including his work collecting 40,000 workers' signatures on a petition calling for a rise in the national minimum wage, his interviews with media outlets outside Iran, and his participation in peaceful demonstrations in support of worker's rights. He had been released from Evin prison for medical reasons in July 2016 after a 64-day hunger strike before his re-arrest.

Trade unionist **Behnam Ebrahimzadeh** was arrested by the Revolutionary Guards on 12 December 2018 and transferred to Evin prison. On 3 March 2019, a Revolutionary Court in Tehran sentenced him to six years in prison on charges including "spreading propaganda against the system". The conviction was based on his peaceful activism, including his participation in protests organized by Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane Company workers. He has said that he was denied access to a lawyer during his trial, which lasted only 10 minutes. He was released on bail on 4 March 2019.

Labour rights activist **Reza Shahabi** was briefly arrested in Tehran on 11 December 2018, along with several other labour rights activists, before being released.

Prominent labour rights activist **Ali Nejati**, a retired worker at Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane Company, was arrested on 29 November 2018 and is facing charges in relation to his participation in protests held by the company's workers. He was released on medical leave on 28 January 2019.

In August 2018, teacher **Mohammad Habibi** was convicted on multiple charges and sentenced to 10 and a half years in prison, 74 lashes, a two-year travel ban and a two-year ban on "membership in political and social parties, groups or collectives" for charges stemming from his peaceful trade union activities. He has to serve seven years and six months of his sentence, as per Article 134 of the Penal Code, which stipulates that, when individuals are convicted on three or more charges, they shall serve the lengthiest single sentence imposed for the most serious charge. He has been imprisoned since May 2018, first in Fashafouyeh prison near Tehran and now in Evin prison.

A number of other labour rights activists continue to serve harsh prison terms after unfair trials in the past few years.

Esmail Abdi, a mathematics teacher and a member of the board of directors at the Teachers' Trade Association of Tehran, is serving a six-year prison sentence in Tehran's Evin prison for "spreading propaganda against the system" and "gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security" in relation to his peaceful trade union activities.

Mahmoud Beheshti Langroodi, a spokesperson for the Iran Teachers Trade Association, is also imprisoned in Evin prison. He has been sentenced to a total of five years in prison, reduced from 14 years, following three separate convictions related to his trade union activities.

The authorities have also targeted journalists who have reported on labour protests.

Four staff members of Gam Magazine, a Persian-language news channel broadcast on the mobile messaging platform, Telegram, have been arrested in recent months, reportedly in connection with the channel's coverage of workers' rights protests in Khuzestan province. **Asal Mohammadi**, a journalist and university student, was arrested at her home in Tehran on 4 December 2018 and transferred to a ministry of intelligence detention centre in Ahvaz after reporting on the protests of steel factory workers in Ahvaz and Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane Company workers in Shush, Khuzestan province. She was released on bail on 5 January 2019 pending trial. The editor of Gam Magazine, **Amirhossein Mohammadifard**, and his wife, **Sanaz Alahyari**, both journalists, were arrested in Tehran on 9 January 2019 and have since been detained in

Section 209 of Tehran's Evin prison. A fourth Gam Magazine staff member, **Amir Amirgholi**, was arrested in Babolsar, Mazandaran province, on 16 January 2019 and is being detained in Evin prison. All have been detained without access to their lawyers.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Amnesty International has documented cases of workers and labour rights activists who have alleged being subjected to torture and other ill-treatment during arrest and in detention, including in some cases to extract forced "confessions". The most egregious case known to Amnesty International is that of labour rights activists **Esmail Bakhshi** and **Sepideh Gholian**, who provided the organization with detailed testimonies.

Esmail Bakhshi, a worker at Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane Company, and Sepideh Gholian, a university student who has attended the protests of Haft Tappeh Sugar Cane Company workers and reported on their grievances on social media, were both arrested on 18 November 2018 after attending a peaceful protest in front of the governor's office in Shush over the unpaid wages of workers at the company. Following their release on bail in mid-December 2018, they reported on social media that they had suffered torture at the hands of security police and intelligence officials.

Following their arrest, they were first taken to the office of the security police in Shush. Sepideh Gholian has said that she was beaten, slammed against a wall and hit on her shoulder with the metal strap of her handbag, and, after Esmail Bakhshi intervened to stop the beating, he was shoved to the ground, had his hands tied behind his back and was beaten by several men. The activists were subsequently taken, while blindfolded, to an undisclosed location in Shush. Following her release, Sepideh Gholian told Amnesty International that an intelligence official "slapped me in the head and insulted me constantly. He used very vulgar and violent sexual language, called me a 'whore', said I was having sexual relationships with Haft Tappeh workers, and threatened to get my relatives to kill me to protect the family's honour." Esmail Bakhshi told Amnesty International: "I was taken, while blindfolded and handcuffed, into a room and ordered to kneel on the floor. Two men then started to kick me in my chest, face and head. As a result, my head hit a wall and I sustained injuries to my face."

After several hours, they were transferred in a van to a ministry of intelligence detention centre in Ahvaz. They told Amnesty International that they were tortured during the trip. Sepideh Gholian said that the officials hit her in the neck repeatedly, subjected her to sexual profanities, and forced her to call herself a "whore". Esmail Bakhshi said that the officials pulled his hair, hit him in his face, chest, back, stomach and throat with their fists and batons, and strangled him multiple times. He said the officials also pulled his legs apart and hit him in the testicles repeatedly while forcing him to call himself vulgar names. He said: "The pain was excruciating, and I lost consciousness three times." As a result of the torture, he said he sustained numerous injuries: "I could hardly walk for several days. I developed a fever and a cold. My face was swollen and clotted blood came out of my nose. I could not move my jaw to chew food. I experienced severe burning when urinating and I was in so much pain that it even hurt to sleep. After nearly two months, I still feel pain in my broken ribs, kidneys, ears and testicles." He added that he was not provided with any medical care while in custody and was denied access to his asthma inhaler and antidepressant medication.

Esmail Bakhshi and Sepideh Gholian said that, when they arrived at the ministry of intelligence detention centre in Ahvaz, they were warned that the worst was yet to come. They recalled the officials saying, "This place is the end of the world. There are no human rights here and you have no option but to confess like a dog." They were put in separate cells and said they could hear the screams and moaning of other detainees being tortured, which caused them severe mental distress. Throughout their detention, they underwent violent interrogations. They had no access to their lawyers during this period. Sepideh Gholian said that the interrogators, who were all men, repeatedly kicked the chair out from underneath her and threatened her with sexual violence, flogging and murder. She said she was given a cable to hold and asked mockingly if she could imagine being flogged with it dozens of times. She was also shown a bed to which prisoners are strapped for flogging while she could hear the screams of men and women being beaten in nearby rooms and threatened that she would be similarly treated if she did not "confess". Esmail Bakhshi said that his interrogators told him an elaborate lie, saying that Sepideh Gholian's family had launched a gun attack on his house because they believed that he was having a sexual affair with her and that his family was now homeless and in hiding.

On 20 January 2019, in apparent reprisal for their public torture allegations, Esmail Bakhshi and Sepideh Gholian were violently rearrested by ministry of intelligence officials in Ahvaz. The day before their arrest, state television broadcast video footage in which they were seen "confessing" to "colluding" with Marxist and Communist groups outside Iran to orchestrate the overthrow of the Islamic Republic system through organizing workers' strikes and demonstrations. They say they were forced into the "confessions" through the torture they experienced. According to Esmail Bakhshi, before filming the "confessions", his interrogators combed his hair, shaved his face and gave him a script. He said they stopped

the recording repeatedly and yelled at him, saying his facial expressions did not convey “enough regret”. Sepideh Gholian said that the pressure on her to “confess” was so intense that, during her interrogations, she would scream and shiver uncontrollably.

The pair were transferred to Evin prison on 28 April 2019.

FLOGGING SENTENCES

According to Amnesty International’s research, in 2018, Iranian courts handed down flogging sentences amounting to a total of nearly 3,000 lashes against 38 workers.

Since International Worker’s Day in 2018, in addition to prison terms, eight teachers were sentenced to 74 lashes each for taking part in trade union activities and peaceful protests and strikes. They are: **Alieh Eghdamdoust; Esmail Gerami; Hossein Gholami; Javad Zolnouri; Mohammad Habibi; Mohammad Sani; Rahman Abedi; and Rasoul Bodaghi.**

In October 2018, the Iranian Labour News Agency reported that a criminal court in Markazi province convicted 15 workers from the Heavy Equipment Production Company (HEPCO) on charges including “disrupting public order” and sentenced them to between one year and 30 months in prison and 74 lashes each for going on strike in protest at unpaid wages.

In December 2018, the Iranian Labour News Agency also reported that a criminal court in Ilam province had convicted 15 workers from the Ilam Petrochemical Plant of “disrupting public order”. They have been sentenced to between six months and two years in prison and 74 lashes each after the workers staged a sit-in outside the factory to protest the expulsion of a number of their colleagues.

As a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Iran is legally obliged to forbid torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment including flogging. The use of corporal punishments such as flogging are an appalling assault on human dignity and violate the absolute prohibition on torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment under international law.