

URGENT ACTION

LABOUR RIGHTS ACTIVISTS AT RISK OF FURTHER TORTURE

Iranian labour rights activists Esmail Bakhshi and Sepideh Gholian, who were rearrested on 20 January after speaking out about beatings and other abuse they suffered in detention in late 2018, are at grave risk of further torture. The authorities must release them immediately and unconditionally as they are prisoners of conscience jailed solely on the basis of their peaceful activism in defence of workers' rights.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USING THIS MODEL LETTER

Mr Hassan Rouhani

President

c/o Permanent Mission of Iran to the UN

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Dear President Rouhani,

I am writing to express grave concern for Iranian labour rights activists Esmail Bakhshi and Sepideh Gholian. They were violently rearrested by ministry of intelligence officials in Ahvaz, Khuzestan province, on 20 January, as apparent reprisal for speaking out about the torture they said they suffered in custody during their detention in November and December 2018. They have since been held, without access to their lawyers, in a ministry of intelligence detention centre in Ahvaz and are at risk of torture and other ill-treatment.

The activists were first arrested on 18 November 2018 after attending a peaceful protest in front of the governor's office in Shush, Khuzestan, over the unpaid wages of workers at Haft Tappeh sugar cane company. Following their release on bail in mid-December, they revealed publicly that they had suffered torture at the hands of security police and intelligence officials, both in Shush and Ahvaz. They said they had been repeatedly beaten, slammed against a wall and shoved to the ground, humiliated with sexual insults, and threatened with flogging, sexual violence and murder.

The Iranian authorities initially responded by promising to investigate the torture allegations. However, within days, key state officials, including the head of the judiciary, the country's chief prosecutor and the head of the president's office, made statements claiming that the allegations of torture were false and threatened to file a complaint against Esmail Bakhshi for bringing the Islamic Republic system into disrepute.

I urge you to ensure that:

- ***Esmail Bakhshi and Sepideh Gholian are released immediately and unconditionally as they are prisoners of conscience, jailed solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedoms of expression, association and assembly;***
- ***Pending their release, they are protected from further torture and other ill-treatment;***
- ***Their allegations of torture are investigated and those responsible are brought to justice in fair trials.***

Yours sincerely,

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Esmail Bakhshi is a worker at Haft Tappeh sugar cane company who has spoken out bravely at the peaceful protests of Haft Tappeh workers over unpaid wages and poor working conditions. Sepideh Gholian is a university student and young labour rights activist who has attended the protests of Haft Tappeh workers and supported their grievances through her reporting and social media posts. Following their arrest on 18 November 2018, they were first taken to the office of the security police in Shush, Khuzestan. Sepideh Gholian has said that, at the point of arrival, 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 beaten by several men. The activists were subsequently taken, while blindfolded, to an undisclosed location in Shush that they believe was under the control of the ministry of intelligence and brought, separately, before a senior official from the ministry of intelligence and a prosecution official. Following her release, Sepideh Gholian told Amnesty International, "The 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 chest, face and head. As a result, my head hit against a wall and I sustained injuries to my face. The officials then took me outside into a yard and tied my hands to a metal bar. The weather was cold and I was shivering. Despite this, I was kept there for about one or two hours."

After spending several hours at the undisclosed location in Shush, Esmail Bakhshi and Sepideh Gholian were put in a van and transferred to a ministry of intelligence detention centre in Ahvaz. They told Amnesty International that they were tortured during the trip, which lasted about one and a half hours. Sepideh Gholian said that the officials ordered her to bend down her head, 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 that the officials also pulled his legs apart and hit him in the testicles repeatedly while forcing him to engage in self-degradation by calling himself vulgar names: "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 blood clots 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. A detention centre doctor visited him after 21 days but spent less than a few minutes with him and ignored the marks of torture on his body.

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 subsequently separated from each other and placed in cells which they said were located next to torture chambers. They said they could hear the screams and moaning of other detainees being subjected to torture day and night, which caused them severe mental distress including fear, anxiety, nightmares and loss of sleep. Throughout their detention, they underwent violent interrogations which often started around 10am and lasted until the early hours of the following morning. They had no access to their lawyers during this period. During their lengthy interrogations, they had to sit blindfolded, facing a wall, which they said resulted in back pain and numbness in their legs. 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 he was wrongly told by his interrogators 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 his family was now homeless and in hiding.

On 19 January 2019, just a day before the activists were rearrested, state TV broadcast the "confessions" that they had said were obtained through torture. In the videos, the activists are shown "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. 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.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English or Persian

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 15 May 2019

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Esmail Bakhshi (he/him) and Sepideh Gholian (she/her)