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Iran must overturn jail sentence of prominent lawyer and human rights defender

Amnesty International is calling on the Iranian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release a prominent lawyer and human rights defender (HRD) and member of the Centre for Human Rights Defenders (CHRD), an organization co-founded by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi.

Abdolfattah Soltani, a founding member of the Centre, was originally sentenced by Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court to 18 years' imprisonment to be served in the remote city of Borazjan, some 620 miles south-west of the capital Tehran, which will make it hard for his family to visit him. Abdolfattah Soltani was also banned from practicing law for 20 years. His lawyer and family were informed of the initial sentence on 4 March 2012. On 11 June 2012 his family was informed that Branch 54 of the Appeal Court of Tehran had reduced his sentence to 13 years' imprisonment and overturned the ban on practicing law for 20 years; the court confirmed that his imprisonment sentence is to be served in the city of Borazjan.

Arrested on 10 September 2011 on charges including "spreading propaganda against the system", "setting up an illegal opposition group [the CHRD]", and "gathering and colluding with intent to harm national security", Abdolfattah Soltani also faced charges of "accepting an illegal prize and illegal earnings" relating to his acceptance of the Nuremberg International Human Rights Award in 2009.

On at least two occasions since his imprisonment, Abdolfattah Soltani has been pressured to "confess" on camera, including "confessing" that the Centre had received funding from foreign sources to encourage a "soft revolution" in Iran – which Abdolfattah Soltani denies.

Amnesty International also understands that Abdolfattah Soltani's wife, Massoumeh Dehghan, has faced intimidation and harassment from the Iranian authorities for advocating on behalf of her husband since his imprisonment, including by giving interviews to journalists abroad about her husband's case.

Abdolfattah Soltani suffers from anaemia, for which he takes medication which has been provided to Abdolfattah Soltani by his family. On at least one occasion, prison guards reportedly refused to provide Abdolfattah Soltani with the required medication his family had brought.

Since the CHRD was forcibly closed in December 2008, the Iranian authorities have been carrying out a campaign of prosecution and harsh sentencing against anyone with actual or perceived links to the Centre. Its members have continued to carry out their work in support of human rights but have faced repeated harassment, intimidation, arrest and imprisonment. Several are currently serving prison sentences in Tehran's Evin Prison.

Executive Chairperson of the CHRD **Narges Mohammadi** is currently serving a six-year sentence for "gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security" and "spreading propaganda against the system" in Zanjan prison, north-west Iran.

CHRD member and lawyer **Mohammad Seyfzadeh** is currently serving a two-year prison sentence, reduced on appeal from nine years, for his role in establishing the CHRD. He was arrested in April 2011 for allegedly attempting to leave the country illegally and was held in a detention facility in Oroumieh, north-west Iran, in conditions amounting to enforced disappearance for around two weeks. He had previously been sentenced in October 2010 to nine years' imprisonment for "forming and being a member of an association [the CHRD]... whose aim is to harm national security" and "spreading propaganda against the system". At the same time, he was also sentenced to a 10-year ban on practising law.

Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, a co-founder of the CHRD, was sentenced in July 2011 to nine years' imprisonment on charges relating to his alleged involvement in seeking the "soft overthrow" of the government and "spreading propaganda against the system". He was also banned from teaching and from his profession as a lawyer for 10 years. On 28 April 2012, Mohammad Ali Dadkhah was informed that an appeals court had confirmed the sentence. Mohammad Ali Dadkhah is currently at liberty, though he may be called to serve his sentence at any time.

Prominent female human rights lawyer, **Nasrin Sotoudeh**, who has represented CHRD co-founder Shirin Ebadi in the past, is currently serving a six-year jail term, reduced on appeal from 11 years, in Tehran's Evin Prison. Among the charges against her were that she also had links to the CHRD, which she denies. She was also banned from practising law and from leaving the country for 20 years, reduced on appeal in September 2011 to 10 years.

Amnesty International continues to call for Iranian human rights defenders to be allowed to carry out their work without fear of persecution or harassment. Any human rights defender prosecuted in Iran for merely carrying out their peaceful and legitimate human rights work should have their convictions overturned and all individuals detained or imprisoned for such reasons should be released immediately and unconditionally, as they are prisoners of conscience.

Background

In November 2011, the UN Human Rights Committee, which oversees implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, expressed concern "*about continuing reports of harassment or intimidation, prohibition and forceful breaking up of demonstrations, and arrests and arbitrary detentions of human rights defenders*". The committee added that "*human rights defenders and defence lawyers often serve prison sentences based on vaguely formulated crimes such as "mohareb" (enemy of God) or the spreading of propaganda against the establishment*", and recommended that all HRDs detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of assembly and association should be released immediately and unconditionally and that threats, harassment, and assault on HRDs should be promptly, effectively and impartially investigated, with the prosecution of perpetrators where appropriate.

Amnesty International has repeatedly called on Iran to end the persecution of HRDs for their peaceful and legitimate work in defending the human rights of others.

Public Document

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