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IRAN MUST QUASH HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYER'S CONVICTION AHEAD OF PRISON TERM

A nine-year jail term for a prominent human rights lawyer is another nail in the coffin for freedom of expression and association in Iran and should be quashed immediately, Amnesty International warned.

Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, who is a co-founder of Iran's Centre for Human Rights Defenders (CHRD), was sentenced in July last year after being convicted of charges including "membership of an association [the CHRD] seeking the soft overthrow of the government" and "spreading propaganda against the system through interviews with foreign media".

He is due to report to authorities on Saturday when it is expected that he will begin serving his sentence.

"Mohammad Ali Dadkhah's only crime is to have defended the rights of others. He should not even have been on trial in the first place and his sentence should be quashed immediately," said Ann Harrison, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Sending him to prison for nine years would be a further nail in the coffin of freedom of expression and association in Iran, where spurious vague charges are frequently used in an attempt to silence those working to protect human rights."

Mohammad Ali Dadkhah has represented many prominent clients such as prisoner of conscience Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, facing a possible death sentence for alleged "apostasy from Islam" and Ebrahim Yazdi, the 80-year-old former leader of the banned Freedom Movement, who suffers from cancer and was recently summoned to begin serving an eight-year prison term.

While in court planning to represent a client, Mohammad Ali Dadkhah was informed by a judge on 28 April that an appeals court had upheld both his nine-year sentence and a ten-year ban on legal practice and teaching. He had received no prior notification of the appeal court ruling. He was prevented from appearing for his client.

In 2008, Mohammad Ali Dadkhah was disqualified under discriminatory selection from standing for the Central Board of the Bar Association because of his activities as a human rights defender. In 2012, despite confirmation from the current board of the Bar Association that he was competent to stand for election, Mohammad Ali Dadkhah was once again disqualified from standing.

The CHRD, which was led by Nobel Peace Laureate Shirin Ebadi, was forcibly closed by the Iranian authorities in December 2008. 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 was sent to Evin Prison last month. She is currently serving a six-year sentence for "gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security" and "spreading propaganda against the system".

Abdolfattah Soltani, a prominent lawyer and co-founder of the CHRD who has been held in Evin Prison since his

September 2011 arrest, has been sentenced to 18 years in prison for “spreading propaganda against the system”, “forming an illegal opposition group [the CHRD]” and “gathering and colluding with intent to harm national security”.

Another founding member of the CHRD and lawyer, Mohammad Seyfzadeh is currently serving a two-year sentence on charges of “forming and being a member of an association [CHRD]...whose aim is to harm national security” and “spreading propaganda against the system”.

Amnesty International considers them all to be prisoners of conscience imprisoned for their peaceful expression of conscientiously held beliefs.

“With the targeting of the CHRD, the authorities are clearly trying to send a message that those defending the rights of others in Iran should cease their work or face prosecution. These individuals must be released immediately and unconditionally,” said Ann Harrison.

“Human rights defenders should be allowed to continue their lawful and important work without hindrance.”