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Halt the execution of four Kurds on death row in Iran

The Iranian authorities must urgently halt the execution of four Sunni Muslim men from Iran's Kurdish minority who could be executed within days, Amnesty International said.

"The death penalty is a cruel and inhuman punishment and represents a flagrant violation of human rights. The death sentences of these men must be immediately revoked and a re-trial in line with international standards must be ordered," said Hassiba Hadj Saharoui, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

Jamshid Dehgani, his younger brother, Jahangir Dehgani, Hamed Ahmadi and Kamal Molayee were arrested in 2009. They were accused along with six others of involvement in the assassination of a senior Sunni cleric with ties to the Iranian authorities. They have denied any involvement, saying that their arrest and detention preceded the assassination by several months. They were sentenced to death after being convicted of the vaguely-worded offences including "enmity against God" and "corruption on earth". Their death sentences have recently been upheld by the Supreme Court and a prison official at Ghezel Hesar Prison, near Tehran, where they are held, has told them informally that their executions will be carried out in a matter of days.

The trials of the men were marred by allegations of flaws in the judicial process. The four men were denied access to a lawyer before and during their trial and were allegedly subjected to torture and other ill-treatment while in detention. The men also said that they received threats that their family members would be arrested and were forced to sign papers without being allowed to read them.

"Four men risk being executed at any time when they say that their arrest and detention took place before the crime they have been convicted for and that they have been tortured. The Iranian authorities continue to rely extensively on the death penalty with little regard for judicial guarantees and certainly not as a measure of last resort," Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui said.

"The idea that men could be executed when so many doubts surround the case and the legal proceedings is deeply disturbing."

There are at least another 26 Sunni Muslim men, mostly from Iran's Kurdish minority, on death row in Raja'i Shahr Prison in Karaj, north-west of Tehran. Amnesty International has serious concerns that these men may have been tried in court proceedings falling short of fair trial standards.

Amnesty International urges the Iranian authorities to immediately commute all death sentences, including those imposed for drugs offences and on juvenile offenders in contravention of international law, and to impose a moratorium on executions as a first step towards abolishing the death penalty.

The news of the imminent execution comes shortly after the Iranian authorities released 11 political prisoners, including Nasrin Sotoudeh, a prominent human-rights lawyer, on 18 September. This move could be seen as a calculated measure ahead of the United Nations General Assembly unless it is followed

by concrete steps to improve the country's human rights situation. Iran's new President Hassan Rouhani is expected to speak at the UN General Assembly in New York on 24 September 2013.

"There are countless serious human rights violations still ongoing in Iran that must be addressed. Releasing a handful of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience means very little if it does not signal a fundamental shift in Iran's stance on human rights," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

"The Iranian authorities cannot continue to rely so heavily on the death penalty to deal with dissent or social ills such as drug trafficking. They must overhaul their penal code."

So far there are no indications that the election of President Rouhani in June has led to changes in Iran's reliance on the death penalty.

Iran remains the second biggest executor in the world, after China. The Iranian authorities have officially acknowledged that so far this year, 236 executions have been carried out, including 23 in September alone. However, reliable sources have reported at least 160 additional executions took place in 2013.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception.