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Iran: Sakharov Prize winner and other detainees denied visits and medical care

Iran's judiciary and prison authorities should end mistreatment of the prominent rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, Nobel peace laureate Shirin Ebadi and six human rights organizations said today. Ebadi and the rights groups also called on Iran's authorities to allow all prisoners access to necessary medical care and family visits to which they are entitled under international human rights law.

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), and the Iranian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LDDHI), joined by Ebadi, renewed their call on authorities to quash the peaceful activists' convictions and release them unconditionally.

"Journalists, human rights lawyers and rights defenders held solely on account of their peaceful activities – none of these people should be in prison in the first place," said Ebadi.

"Bullying a prisoner's child or denying the person family visits and medical care only makes Iran look even worse in the eyes of the world."

Since the arrest in 2010 of Sotoudeh, a 47-year-old human rights lawyer and mother of two children, authorities have frequently held her in solitary confinement and prevented her from regularly meeting or speaking with her family. Iranian prison authorities have, in the past few months, routinely denied other political prisoners regular visits by their loved ones and access to adequate medical treatment.

Sotoudeh is being treated in the infirmary of Evin prison after she initiated a hunger strike on 17 October, 2012, her husband, Reza Khandan, told the rights groups. He said the hunger strike was in response to harassment of her family by the authorities and restrictions on her visitation rights.

The six human rights organizations and Ebadi said: "We are seriously concerned about Nasrin Sotoudeh and point out the Iranian authorities' responsibilities."

On 26 October, 2012, the European Parliament announced that it had awarded this year's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought to Sotoudeh and the Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi.

Khandan said that Sotoudeh initiated her hunger strike after hearing that judiciary officials had summoned her 12-year-old daughter to inform her that she would not be allowed to travel abroad. Khandan said that Sotoudeh felt "she had no choice" but to go on hunger strike to express her objection to the authorities' harassment of her family and denial of her visitation rights. For the past three months, Evin prison authorities have prevented Sotoudeh's children from visiting their mother face to face and severely restricted Sotoudeh's ability to make telephone calls from prison. They have prohibited her from seeing her mother and brother for almost a year.

In January 2011 a Revolutionary Court sentenced Sotoudeh to 11 years in prison and barred her from practising law or leaving the country for 20 years after her conviction on charges of “acting against the national security” and “propaganda against the system.” An appeals court reduced her sentence to six years and a 10-year ban on travel and practising law. Criminal and Revolutionary Courts do not have the authority under Iranian law to ban lawyers from practising, however, as this comes under the Disciplinary Court for Judges.

Evin prison officials have denied imprisoned journalists Jila Baniyaghoob and Mahsa Amrabadi regular personal visits with their husbands, who are in different prisons. Rights groups have received reports from informed sources that Baniyaghoob, who is serving a one-year sentence in Ward 350 of Evin prison, has not been permitted a visit from her husband, Bahman Ahmadi-Amoui (Ahmadi Amou'i), also a journalist, since her prison term began in September 2012. Amoui is serving a five-year sentence in Rajai Shahr prison, 47 km west of Tehran, on charges that include “propaganda against the system” and “insulting the president”.

Amrabadi is serving a one-year sentence and her husband, Masoud Bastani, also a journalist, is serving a six-year sentence, both on security-related charges including “propaganda against the state” for articles they wrote regarding the disputed 2009 presidential election. The Iranian authorities are holding Amrabadi in Evin, while her husband is in Rajai Shahr prison.

Officials have denied needed medical care to two female political detainees, Bahareh Hedayat and Mahboubeh Karami. Sources told the rights groups that officials have denied Karami access to adequate psychological care for her severe and debilitating depression. A Revolutionary Court sentenced Karami to three years on national security-related charges. Hedayat was allowed to leave prison to seek medical treatment for kidney and digestive tract problems but was forced to return before she had fully recovered. She is serving a 10-year prison term on national security charges.

Iranian judicial and security officials have regularly made it harder for political prisoners to exercise their right to legal counsel. Many prominent rights lawyers are serving prison sentences themselves on charges directly related to their defense of their clients, which has a chilling effect on lawyers providing services.

Javid Houtan Kian (Houtan Kian) is serving an 11-year sentence, charged with “acting against national security”. Iranian authorities arrested Houtan Kian in October 2010 after he publicized the case of his client, Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani. In 2006 she was sentenced to death by stoning, though the resulting international attention led to suspension of her sentence.

Since his arrest in September 2010, Houtan Kian has had minimal visitation rights but has not received adequate medical care despite suffering from a serious digestive illness.

On 4 March, 2012, the prominent rights lawyer Abdolfattah Soltani learned that a Revolutionary Court had sentenced him to 18 years in prison, barred him from practising law for 20 years, and ordered him to serve his sentence in Barazjan, about 1200 kilometers south of Tehran.

Prosecutors charged Soltani with “propaganda against the system”, “assembly and collusion against the state”, and “establishing an illegal group” – namely, the Centre for Human Rights Defenders (CHRD), which Soltani co-founded with Ebadi. An appeals court later reduced Soltani’s sentence to 13 years but upheld the 20-year ban on practicing law.

In April 2012, an appeals court upheld a nine-year sentence for another lawyer, Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, on charges related to interviews with foreign media and membership in CHRD. The court also sentenced Dadkhah to fines and flogging and banned him practicing law and teaching for 10 years. Mohammad Seifzadeh, another rights lawyer and member of CHRD, is serving a two-year sentence on similar charges, with other cases pending against him.

International and Iranian law require prison authorities to provide all those held with adequate medical care. Iran’s State Prison Organization regulations state that, if necessary, detainees must be transferred to

a hospital outside the prison facility. The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners require that authorities transfer all those held needing specialist treatment to specialized institutions, including civilian hospitals.

Both Iranian law and international law require prison authorities to provide basic necessities to all prisoners, to allow them regular visits – including personal visits by family members, and to treat them with dignity and respect. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a state party, prohibits inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.