

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index:
News Service No:
31 May 2007

MDE 13/063/2007 (Public)
097

Iran: End harassment of dual-nationals - Human rights groups protest detentions and travel bans

Joint statement from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the International Federation for Human Rights, Reporters Without Borders

(New York, May 31, 2007) – The Iranian government should immediately release two Iranian-Americans from detention and clarify the case of a third who may have “disappeared,” a group of leading human rights organizations said today. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the International Federation for Human Rights, Reporters Without Borders and the Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi also urged Iran to lift travel bans on two journalists with dual nationality whom Iran has barred from traveling back to their home countries.

These measures appear to be an attempt by Iran’s security authorities to sow fear into the wider community of journalists, writers, scholars and activists. Their exchanges with counterparts in other parts of the world underscore both their commitment to enhance mutual respect and recognition of human dignity through dialogue and to see human rights norms upheld in their country.

“These actions violate Iran’s laws as well as international norms,” said Ebadi, winner of the 2003 Nobel peace prize, who is also the lawyer for two of those caught in the crackdown. “The Judiciary is denying dual-nationals their basic rights.”

The detentions and travel bans are part of a broad crackdown being mounted against Iranian human rights activists, students, and labor organizers by Iranian intelligence officials based in the country’s Information Ministry. Intelligence officials in the Information Ministry are currently holding two Iranian-American scholars, Kian Tajbakhsh and Haleh Esfandiari, inside Tehran’s notorious Evin prison.

Another Iranian-American, Ali Shakeri, a peace activist from Irvine, California, is also believed to be in detention, and may be the victim of an enforced disappearance. In addition, the government has confiscated the passports of two journalists, Parnaz Azima, an Iranian-American, and Mehrnoush Solouki, a French-Iranian, preventing them from leaving Iran.

Ebadi and the human rights groups expressed grave concerns for the health and safety of the detainees as well as the two journalists trapped in Iran.

Esfandiari and Tajbakhsh are currently being held in ward 209 of Evin prison. On May 29, 2007, the Judiciary’s spokesperson, Alireza Jamshidi, told a news conference that they and Azima had been charged after a complaint was made against them by the Information Ministry. It accuses

them of “acting against national security by engaging in propaganda against the Islamic republic by the method of spying on behalf of foreigners.”

Agents of the Information Ministry arrested Esfandiari on May 8. The 67-year-old director of the Middle East program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, was transferred to Evin prison the same day. Tajbakhsh, a 45-year-old social scientist who consulted for the Iranian government as well as international organizations, was detained three days later, on May 11. Both are being detained incommunicado and denied access to their lawyers or family.

On May 20, the Information Ministry issued a statement accusing Esfandiari of promoting civil society in Iran “to further the interests of foreign powers.” This statement and a number of articles in the hardline daily *Kayhan* have referred to the professional activities of Esfandiari and Tajbakhsh, such as attending international scholarly conferences, as evidence of “acting against national security.”

“These charges are politically motivated and only serve to further isolate Iranian civil society,” Ebadi said. “The government is punishing these detainees because they promoted dialogue between Iranians and the international community.”

Shakeri, 59, “disappeared” on May 8 as he was leaving Iran for Europe. According to his associates, he called his family 48 hours later to say that “there was a misunderstanding, and I am OK.” On May 29, the Judiciary’s spokesperson said “Shakeri is not in detention, and there are no charges against him.” However, Shakeri’s whereabouts remain unknown. The international organizations called on the Iranian government to investigate Shakeri’s initial detention on May 8, to make public his current whereabouts and to release him if he is in detention, and allow him to leave the country to join his family in California.

The authorities have also banned two journalists with dual nationality from leaving Iran. Solouki, a Quebec University journalism student who has dual French and Iranian nationality, was detained on February 17 while making a documentary film about events following the 1988 ceasefire in the war between Iran and Iraq. She was held for a month at Evin prison by Information Ministry officials who also confiscated her notes and film, and then released on bail of 100 million Touman (US\$100,000) on March 19. However, the authorities did not return her passport, preventing her from leaving Iran. Intelligence officials have summoned her for interrogation several times since her release.

Azima, a reporter for the Persian-language services of Radio Free Europe who holds both Iranian and American citizenship, is also being prevented from leaving Iran. Her passport was confiscated by the authorities in January 2007. On May 21, following the deposit of a large bail payment, the authorities refused to return her passport, citing the interest in her case by the Information Ministry.

Iranian intelligence agents often bring politically motivated charges of “endangering national security” against activists and intellectuals. Agents of the Information Ministry arrested Abdolfattah Soltani, a prominent human rights lawyer, in August 2005, accusing him of spying. The ministry’s agents held Soltani in Evin prison for seven months, before releasing him on bail. On May 28, 2007, an appeals court in Tehran acquitted Soltani of all charges.

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the International Federation for Human Rights, Reporters Without Borders, and Ebadi reminded the Iranian authorities that they bear full responsibility for the health and safety of all those detained by the state, and that all detainees must be treated with dignity and allowed access to their lawyers and visitors. They also called on the Iranian government to end its persecution and prosecution of dual-national scholars and journalists.

For more information, please contact:

In London, Amnesty International's press office: +44-20-7413-5566

In New York, for Human Rights Watch, Hadi Ghaemi (English, Persian): +1-917-669-5996
(mobile)

In Paris, for the International Federation for Human Rights, +33-1-43-55-2011 and Karim Lahidji
(French, Persian): +33-6-304-603-73

In Paris, for Reporters Without Borders, Reza Moini (French, Persian): +33-1-44-83-84- 84

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20
7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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