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Iran: End persecution of film industry workers

Amnesty International condemns the arrest of four men and one woman who all work in the film industry. The organization is calling for their immediate and unconditional release as they appear to be held solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression, or for their contacts with foreign media, particularly the BBC.

Four documentary directors - **Hadi Afarideh, Naser Saffarian, Mohsen Shahrnazdar** and **Mojtaba Mir Tahmasb** - along with producer and distributor, **Katayoun Shahabi** were arrested on 17 September 2011. They are believed to be held in Section 209 of Evin Prison in Tehran, which is controlled by the Ministry of Intelligence. Their families are reportedly under pressure not to speak about their arrest.

On 19 September 2011, Iranian local media announced the arrest of five men and a woman, all unnamed, alleged to have "provided BBC Persian with information, films and secret reports to paint a black picture of Iran and Iranians." The names of those arrested were later publicized. One of the men, Shahnam Bazdar, was reportedly released shortly afterwards. He appears to be unconnected to the film makers. All film makers had sold their work to the BBC.

The Minister of Intelligence told Iranian state television on 25 September 2011 that "more people" accused of links to BBC Persian had been summoned for questioning, without giving a number. The arrests of the film-makers followed a documentary shown on BBC Persian about the life of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Satellite dishes are banned inside Iran and the BBC's satellite transmission of the programme was jammed inside Iran.

In January 2010, the Iranian authorities banned contact with over 60 foreign institutions, including the BBC and some other media outlets, as well as some human rights organizations. Anyone making contacts with these institutions is at risk of prosecution and imprisonment. This move appeared designed to hide from the world the truth of events in Iran and to obstruct reporting on the human rights situation.

The arrests exemplify exhaustive efforts by the Iranian security services to stifle any form of dissenting voice in the country, and to isolate Iranians from the international community by criminalizing contact with foreign media and other organizations.

Three of those arrested - Nasser Saffarian, Mojtaba Mir Tahmasb and Katayoun Shahabi - have been allowed to make very brief telephone calls to family members confirming their arrest. No further contact is known to have been permitted with any of those detained.

Katayoun Shahabi was reportedly arrested after a female intelligence official knocked on her door, pretending to be pregnant. She asked for help but when Katayoun Shahabi came to her assistance, the official removed padding used to give the impression that she was pregnant, and three male officials entered her residence, searching her belongings, causing damage, at the end of which she was reportedly taken away, along some of her personal effects.

Mojtaba Mir Tahmasb directed *This is Not a Film*, a 75-minute depiction of the life that prominent director Ja'far Panahi has led since his December 2010 conviction and sentence to a prison term and a ban on involvement in film-making. Prior to his arrest, on 5 September

2011 Mojtaba Mir Tahmasb was removed from a flight to Europe, and his passport confiscated. His wife travelled to Europe in his place to present *This is Not a Film* to a variety of film festivals. On her return, she is reported to have expressed dismay at the damage done to their home following a search by security officials.

Media reports quoting an array of government officials and state-supported groups, have accused those arrested of being “spies.

Iran’s House of Cinema, a professional association for the film industry, issued a statement following the arrests, calling for respect for the rights of its detained members and for adherence to all legal provisions. The House of Cinema has been heavily criticised for this statement by many officials, including some MPs who have called for the association to have its license suspended.

In July 2010, the government created the High Council of Cinema, overseen by the President of Iran and headed by the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, supported by six pro-government cinematographers, which is the main source of production funding. All cinema-related work in the country is to be coordinated by this recently established body, including the operations of the House of Cinema.

The right to freedom of expression is guaranteed by Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a state party.

Background

Iranian cinema is world-renowned and films from Iran frequently win awards at international film festivals, with directors finding creative ways to circumvent the pervasive state censorship in the industry.

Workers in Iran’s film industry have been facing growing repression in recent months. Several are detained or face imprisonment for their peaceful activities related to their work. Actress **Marzieh Vafamehr** is believed to remain in detention in Gharchak (or Qarchak) Prison in Varamin, south east of Tehran since her arrest in June 2011. On 4 August 2011, her husband said that her temporary arrest order had been extended for one month. Her current legal situation is unclear to Amnesty International.

In July 2011, security officials arrested film makers, **Mahmaz Mohammadi** and **Pegah Ahangarani**, as well as a photojournalist **Maryam Majd**. All three women were later released on bail.

Internationally celebrated directors **Ja’far Panahi** and **Mohammad Rasoulof** were both sentenced to six years’ imprisonment in December 2010. Ja’far Panahi was also banned from any involvement in film-making for 20 years. Both remain free awaiting the verdict of their appeals against their conviction and sentences. Ja’far Panahi is unable to work or travel due to bans imposed on him. In May 2011, an international travel ban imposed on Mohammad Rasoulof in 2009 was lifted.

Since the 2009 presidential election in Iran, other internationally acclaimed film makers have left Iran, including Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Bahman Ghobadi.

Amnesty International is continuing to call for any charges solely connected to the peaceful exercise of their right to expression brought against these individuals to be dropped.

Prior to the disputed June 2009 election, a wide range of billboards and large posters of well-known actress, **Fatemeh Motamed Arya**, were set on fire and destroyed. She had conducted interviews stating that Iranians ‘wanted life’ and preferred peace in the face of international

threats against the country. Mention of her name has reportedly been banned while films in which she has appeared have been re-edited in order to remove her from appearing.

Public Document

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