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Iran: Enforced closure of human rights centre an ominous development

The forcible closure of the Tehran-based Centre for Human Rights Defenders (CHRD) by the Iranian authorities on 21 December is an extremely ominous development threatening the country's entire human rights movement. Amnesty International is calling for the decision to be reversed without delay.

The CHRD was forcibly closed down by dozens of police and plain-clothes security officials who went to its offices shortly before the Centre was to hold an event commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). According to Narges Mohammadi, spokesperson for the CHRD, security officials failed to show any official order justifying their action and one told her that if she were not a woman, he would drag her by the legs and throw her into the street.

The CHRD was co-founded in 2002 by Shirin Ebadi, Iran's best known human rights defender who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003. She was present at the time of the Centre's forcible closure yesterday. The Centre has sought legal registration since its formation six years ago but this has been continuously denied by the Iranian authorities, leaving Dr Ebadi and her colleagues to operate in a form of legal limbo, and under constant threat. She has previously received death threats.

It is unclear why the Iranian security authorities decided to act against the Centre now. They appear to have wished to prevent a celebration of the UDHR, the founding document of modern human rights law, and also to send a powerful – and chilling – warning to Iran's growing movement of human rights activists and defenders by targeting the organization headed by the most internationally renowned leader of the movement.

The CHRD has three stated roles, reporting violations of human rights in Iran; providing pro-bono legal representation to political prisoners; and support to the families of political prisoners. Its members have pursued high profile cases of impunity, and defended high profile victims of human rights violations. Some – such as lawyer Abdolfattah Soltani – have been detained in the past for no more than carrying out his duty as a lawyer.

Amnesty International calls for the CHRD to be allowed to resume its activities without delay and to be allowed legal registration. The Iranian government should abide by its obligations under international law to promote and protect human rights and should support, not attack and undermine, the work of human rights defenders.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 or email: press@amnesty.org

International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK
www.amnesty.org