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Iran: Deaths in custody highlight utter disregard for life by prison authorities

Prison authorities in Iran are further punishing prisoners by denying them medical treatment, Amnesty International said today following the second death in custody in less than two weeks as a result of being denied treatment.

"It is shameful that the health of prisoners is disregarded to such an extent that they are denied potentially life-saving treatment and allowed to die while in the care of the state. We fear that refusal of timely medical care is being used as another tactic in the arsenal of repression of dissent in Iran," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme.

"The Iranian authorities must open an investigation into this and other deaths in custody and ensure that any officials responsible are brought to justice."

Omid Reza Mirsayafi, an internet blogger aged around 25, died on 18 March at Tehran's Evin Prison less than six weeks after he is said to have begun serving a 30-month prison sentence. He was convicted of "insulting the Supreme Leader" and "propaganda against the system" in relation to articles he had written on his blog, Rooznegar; he denied the charges. Prior to his detention, Omid Reza Mirsayafi told the NGO Reporters without Borders, "I am a cultural blogger, not a political blogger. Of all the articles I have posted online, only two or three were satirical. I did not mean to insult anyone."

According to Amnesty International's information, Mirsayafi became seriously ill after taking an overdose of a medication he received from the prison clinic for depression. Another prisoner, who is a medical doctor, Dr Hesam Firouzi, provided immediate assistance and recommended his hospitalization. Despite this, prison staff failed to transfer him to hospital. Mirsayafi died in a medical facility of the prison.

Two weeks earlier, on 6 March 2009, Amir Hossein Heshmat Saran died at a hospital in Karaj shortly after he was taken there from Raja'i Shahr (or Gohardasht) Prison. He was serving an eight-year sentence imposed in 2004 for establishing the United National Front political party. His death occurred after he became seriously ill on 4 March, although he had been feeling unwell for several days previously. According to his wife, who visited him in hospital on 5 March, he was in a coma and was shackled to the hospital bed. After his death, she was told by a hospital doctor that he had suffered a brain haemorrhage and a lung infection and that he should have been hospitalized sooner.

"These latest deaths underline the urgent need for the Iranian authorities to improve prison conditions and to take immediate measures to ensure that all prisoners in their custody are treated humanely," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

Background

Other political prisoners have died in custody in suspicious circumstances in recent years. They include Abdolreza Rajabi, a member of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), whose death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, died unexpectedly in Reja'i Shahr Prison on 30 October 2008, a day after he had been transferred there from Evin Prison. In 2006, Akbar Mohammadi, a student, died in Evin Prison, and Valiollah Feyz Mahdavi, a PMOI member under sentence of death, died in Reja'i Shahr Prison after hunger strikes in which they were apparently denied adequate medical attention (see <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/099/2006/en>). Amnesty International is not aware of any independent investigations into these deaths. Instead, Khalil Bahramian, the lawyer for Akbar Mohammadi's family, found himself under investigation after he lodged a complaint over Akbar Mohammadi's death.

Amnesty International has previously documented a pattern of denial of medical treatment to political prisoners, possibly as an extra punishment for their perceived crimes, or their behaviour in prison (see <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/010/2006>).

Convicted prisoners in Iran are held in prisons run by the State Prisons and Security and Corrective Measures Organization, which is under the control of the Head of the Judiciary.