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## **Iran: Roxana Saberi hostage to strained political US-Iranian relations**

US-Iranian journalist Roxana Saberi is a pawn to the ongoing political developments between Iran and the USA and should be considered a prisoner of conscience, Amnesty International said today as it called for Saberi's immediate and unconditional release.

"The fact that Roxana Saberi faced a shifting tide of accusations from the time of her arrest until her trial is an indication that the Iranian authorities were looking for any excuse to detain her," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme. "There is no reason for holding Roxana Saberi, unless the Iranian authorities can provide convincing evidence that she committed a recognizable criminal offence."

Thirty-one-year-old Roxana Saberi, who was born in the USA and has lived in Iran for the past six years where she had been working as a journalist, was sentenced on 18 April to eight years in prison for "espionage" in a closed trial.

Her father has said that "confessions" made under duress during her pre-trial detention may have been used as evidence in her trial.

Amnesty International has noted a statement made by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Sunday 19 April in which he instructs the Tehran General Prosecutor to ensure that Roxana Saberi receives her full legal rights to defend herself and a subsequent statement on Monday 20 April by the Head of the Judiciary which called for her to have a speedy, fair appeal.

"The recent statements by President Ahmadinejad appear to be a tacit recognition of a fact that we have been highlighting for years - that justice in Iran is hard to come by," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

"If – as appears to be the case – Roxana Saberi is held solely for political reasons in connection to Iran's relations with the USA, or on account of the peaceful exercise of her internationally recognized right to freedom of expression, then she is a prisoner of conscience who should be released immediately and unconditionally. We trust that in this case at least, justice will be served during the appeals process."

### **Background**

Roxana Saberi was arrested on 31 January and was initially accused of having purchased alcohol which is banned in Iran. She was held in Tehran's Evin Prison, where reports of torture and ill-treatment of detainees are common. The accusations against her were later changed to carrying on reporting as a journalist after her press credentials were revoked by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in 2006.

She was finally charged with “espionage” on 13 April at a trial session in which she retracted her earlier “confessions”. Her conviction and sentence were announced on 18 April. After her trial, her father, Reza Saberi, said that his daughter had “confessed” to certain activities during her initial detention, possibly during the initial five weeks when she had no access to a lawyer, as she was told that if she cooperated with her interrogators, she would be released. She retracted these confessions at her trial. Her lawyer has stated his intention to lodge an appeal against her conviction and sentence. The Head of the Judiciary has also written to the Tehran Judiciary stating that "different dimensions of this case, including material and moral elements of the crime, must be considered at the appeals stage in a careful, quick and fair way".

Several US-Iranian dual nationals have been detained in Iran in recent years since the US Congress announced an extra US\$75 million funding for “supporting democracy” in Iran. They include Dr Haleh Esfandiari, Kian Tajbakhsh, Parnaz Azima and Ali Shakeri. Most have been accused of acting against national security, particularly with relation to participation in an alleged “soft revolution” in Iran.

Five Iranian diplomats are held in the USA after being arrested in Iraq in 2007. In a meeting with the Swiss President on 19 April, President Ahmadinejad called for their release. Some commentators have also suggested that Roxana Saberi’s arrest and trial may also be in part due to internal rivalries in the Iranian system with regard to the election of President Obama in the USA and his recent overtures towards Iran.