

URGENT ACTION

TORTURED CONSERVATIONISTS FACE DEATH PENALTY

Eight detained conservationists could face the death penalty or long prison sentences, following a grossly unfair trial in which they were accused of trumped-up spying charges. Their charges stem solely from their conservation activities including carrying out research into Iran's endangered wildlife. They have said they were subjected to torture and other ill-treatment.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Head of the Judiciary Ebrahim Raisi
C/o Permanent Mission of Iran to the UN
Chemin du Petit-Saconnex 28
1209 Geneva, Switzerland

Twitter handle: @UN_Iran <mailto:iranunog@mfa.gov.ir>

Dear Mr Ebrahim Raisi,

Eight conservationists who have been detained in Tehran's Evin prison since their arrests in late January 2018 are awaiting a court verdict following a grossly unfair trial.

Niloufar Bayani, Houman Jowkar, Morad Tahbaz and Taher Ghadirian have been charged with "corruption on earth" (efsad f'il arz) and could be sentenced to death. **Amirhossein Khaleghi, Sepideh Kashani and Abdolreza Kouhpayeh** have been charged with espionage and could face up to 10 years in prison. **Sam Rajabi** has been charged with offences including "co-operating with hostile states against the Islamic Republic" and could face up to 11 years in prison. Without providing any evidence, the authorities have accused them of using scientific and environmental projects as a cover to collect classified military information. The charges against the scientists, who are linked to the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation, stem from their research activities on endangered species in Iran, including the Asiatic cheetah and Persian leopard.

Following their arrests, they were held incommunicado in Section 2-A of Evin prison without access to a lawyer and limited family contact. According to reliable sources, during one family prison visit, some of them displayed signs of physical torture, with broken teeth and bruising on their bodies. The unfair trial, held before Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, relied almost entirely on "confessions" allegedly made under torture and later retracted, as the main evidence against them. Niloufar Bayani told the court that she only made a "confession" after she was "broken" through physical and psychological torture and that she later retracted her "confession". She said interrogators threatened to beat her, inject her with hallucinogenic drugs, pull out her fingernails and arrest her parents; they also showed her a piece of paper saying that it was her death sentence. During one of the trial sessions, the judge told her to leave the courtroom for being "too disruptive" after she repeatedly objected to her retracted forced "confession" being used against her and the other conservationists. Consequently, she was not allowed to appear in court for the final three trial sessions. All eight conservationists have been denied access to a lawyer of their choosing throughout their entire detention and trial.

I urge you to release all eight conservationists immediately and unconditionally, as they are prisoners of conscience, detained solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedoms of expression, association and assembly, including through their work protecting Iran's endangered wildlife. Please ensure that, pending their release, they are protected from torture and other ill-treatment and are given regular access to their families and lawyers of their own choosing.

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

On 24 and 25 January 2018, Revolutionary Guards officials entered the office of the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation in Tehran, questioning staff and searching the premises for several hours. They then took several members of the staff including Niloufar Bayani and Sam Rajabi to their homes, searching the premises and confiscating personal belongings. They arrested others in their homes. They then transferred eight conservationists to Section 2-A of Evin prison, which is controlled by the Revolutionary Guards, where they were held for months without access to lawyers and with very limited access to their families through short sporadic telephone calls. Family visits thereafter were infrequent and short, and held under supervision in the prosecutor's office in Evin prison. None of the scientists have been allowed access to lawyers of their own choosing. Several of the defendants' first choice of lawyer was refused because the judge argued that the lawyer in question is "active on Twitter, posts tweets about human rights and his cases, and speaks to the media". Even in court, they were not allowed to speak with their lawyers. Sam Rajabi's repeated requests to be represented by his own independently chosen lawyer were rejected by the judge, leaving him without legal representation in court.

The eight conservationists are among nine scientists who were arrested by the Revolutionary Guards in January 2018. One of them, Kavous Seyed-Emami, a Canadian-Iranian scientist and academic, died under suspicious circumstances in Evin prison two weeks after his arrest. The authorities claimed that he had committed suicide, a claim contested by his family, and refused to release his body unless his family agreed to an immediate burial without an independent autopsy. The Iranian authorities have failed to conduct an independent and impartial investigation into his death and have banned his wife from leaving the country. In court, Niloufar Bayani said that her interrogators showed her pictures of the dead body of Kavous Seyed-Emami and implied that she would meet a similar fate.

The authorities have accused the eight conservationists of using scientific and environmental projects, such as tracking the Asiatic cheetah with cameras, as a cover to collect classified military information, even though the use of cameras is a standard tool used by conservationists to monitor rare and endangered species. In May 2018, a governmental committee consisting of the ministers of intelligence, interior and justice and the president's legal deputy looked into the detention of the conservationists and concluded that there was no evidence to suggest they were spies. Several senior officials in the Iranian government including from the department of environment have called for the scientists' release, citing a lack of evidence that they had engaged in espionage.

The Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation is a non-governmental, not-for-profit organization. It has been licensed to operate by the Iranian government's department of environment and carries out its research following acquisition of governmental permits. Its website says the organization "helps protect and conserve the wildlife and natural habitats of Iran through scientific research, education and awareness raising, as well as on-the-ground conservation practices and local community engagement".

Several of the detained conservationists are members of one or more of the following groups: the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the Species Survival Commission, the Cat Specialist Group and the Bear Specialist Group.

In 2018, in total, at least 63 conservationists, environmental scientists and activists were arrested in Iran.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Persian, English

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 8 August 2019

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Niloufar Bayani (she/her); Houman Jowkar (he/him); Morad Tahbaz (he/him); Taher Ghadirian (he/him); Amirhossein Khaleghi (he/him); Sepideh Kashani (she/her); Abdolreza Kouhpayeh (he/him); Sam Rajabi (he/him)