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Iran urged to halt execution of US national in ‘spying’ case

Iran must not execute a US national sentenced to death after an unfair trial, Amnesty International said today amid fears he could be executed within weeks.

Amir Hekmati, an Arizona-born Iranian-American who had served as an Arabic translator in the US Marine Corps, was accused of spying for the CIA and sentenced to death for “collaboration with a hostile government”. His appeal against this conviction and sentence must be lodged within 20 days.

Hekmati was held without access to his family, a lawyer or consular assistance after his arrest in August last year, in violation of international law.

He was made to participate in a televised "confession" before his trial in December, breaching his rights to a fair trial even further.

“Like many other detainees in Iran, Amir Hekmati did not receive a fair trial and we question the timing and political circumstances of this decision,” said Ann Harrison, Amnesty International’s interim Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“We know from past experience that the Iranian authorities sometimes rush forward with executions of political prisoners – including dual nationals – at politically sensitive times and we fear that this execution could happen within days or weeks.”

The death sentence for Hekmati comes at a time of heightened tensions between Iran and the US, amid announcements that Iran has begun uranium enrichment and strengthened US sanctions against Iran.

The Iranian authorities have executed political prisoners in January over the past two years, in relation to the unrest following the disputed presidential election of 2009.

These executions have widely been seen as warnings to potential opposition protesters ahead of yearly celebrations marking the 11 February anniversary of the Iranian Revolution when people are encouraged to demonstrate in large numbers in support of the state. Zahra Bahrami, who held dual Dutch-Iranian nationality, was executed for alleged drugs offences in January 2011 while awaiting trial on political charges related to the post-election unrest.

Parliamentary elections – the first elections to be held since 2009 – are also scheduled for March 2012.

“The lives of political detainees on death row in Iran are hanging in the balance this month,” said Ann Harrison.

Others sentenced to death in Iran

Gholamreza Khosravi Savadjani, an alleged supporter of the People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran

(PMOI) who reportedly spent more than 40 months in solitary confinement in various detention centres in Iran, is also facing execution.

Arrested in Kerman on 24 February 2008, he was sentenced to death in late 2011 after conviction of “moharebeh” (enmity against God) in connection with his alleged financial support to the pro-PMOI TV station Simay-Azadi.

Three alleged PMOI supporters – Ali Saremi, Ja'far Kazemi and Mohammad Ali Haj Aghaei – were executed in Iran between 26 December 2010 and 24 January 2011. All men had been convicted of moharebeh (enmity against God) in relation to contacts with the PMOI.

Blogger Vahid Asghari, who had hosted websites critical of the government, was sentenced to death on Friday after conviction in an unfair trial of “corruption on earth” for allegedly organising a “pornographic” network against Islam and the state.

Asghari had been held since May 2008. In October 2009 he said in a letter to a judge that he had been subjected to torture, forced to make a televised “confession” and forced to make spying allegations against high profile blogger Hossein Derakhshan.

Saeed Malekpour, a 36-year-old web designer and permanent resident of Canada, is also under sentence of death following a retrial on similar charges, which may be linked to Vahid Asghari’s case. A previous death sentence was reported in June 2011 to have been overturned

Prior to his arrest during a family visit to Iran in 2008, he had created a program enabling photos to be uploaded online which had then been used to post pornographic images without his knowledge. He is alleged to have been tortured while being held in solitary confinement in Evin Prison for more than a year.

The government has officially acknowledged executing 17 people already this year, although Amnesty International has received information suggesting at least 39 people may have been put to death in the first week of 2012 alone.

In December 2011, Amnesty International highlighted a massive wave of executions in Iran throughout 2011, with over 600 people being put to death between the beginning of 2011 and November. Most of these were for drug related offences.

The scope of the death penalty is very broad in Iran and thousands are believed to remain on death row.

Most are alleged drugs offenders, but at least 14 women and men – including Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani - are facing stoning to death after conviction of “adultery while married”. Pastor Yousef Naderkhani also remains held pending the outcome of his retrial on the charge of “apostasy from Islam”.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases as the ultimate violation of the right to life.