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## **Iranian Baha'i leaders hit by 'vindictive' sentence extension**

The reimposition of 20-year jail terms on seven leaders of Iran's Baha'i religious minority is "outrageous", Amnesty International said today as it made a renewed call for their immediate release..

The seven had previously had their sentences cut from 20 to 10 years by an Iranian appeal court, only for the authorities to reverse the decision.

"Yet again, the Iranian authorities are manipulating their own justice system to persecute members of a religious minority," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Instead of doubling their sentences, the authorities should be setting the Baha'i leaders free, right now, and guaranteeing their freedom to practice their religion free from threat or persecution.

"Such arbitrary and vindictive acts are a salutary reminder of why the UN Human Rights Council voted recently to create a Special Rapporteur on Iran. The Council's decision came not a moment too soon."

The seven Baha'i leaders, two women and five men, are held in harsh conditions at Reja'i Shahr (also known as Gohardasht) prison in Karaj, near Tehran.

They were convicted of alleged crimes including "espionage for Israel", "insulting religious sanctities" and "propaganda against the system" by a Revolutionary Court in Tehran in August last year. They denied all the charges against them.

In September 2010 they were told that their sentences had been reduced to 10 years after an appeal court acquitted them of some of the charges, including espionage, but they have never been given a written copy of either of the court verdicts.

It was first reported on 18 March that the 20-year sentence had been reinstated and this was confirmed by the Baha'i International Community yesterday.

It appears the decision may be a result of a challenge to the reduced sentence by the Prosecutor General.

Arrests and harassment of Baha'is has increased sharply in recent years, with at least 79 Baha'is currently in prison.

Amnesty International has been campaigning for the immediate and unconditional release of the seven - - Fariba Kamalabadi, Mahvash Sabet, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm - since their arrest in 2008. Some are elderly and in poor health.

"This is the latest example of the deeply entrenched discrimination faced by the Baha'i minority in Iran,"

said Malcolm Smart.

"It is also a reminder to the international community of how little regard the Iranian authorities pay to international human rights standards on freedom of belief, association, expression and the right to a fair trial."

#### Background

The seven Baha'is were arrested between March and May 2008. One of their lawyers, Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, has felt unable to return to Iran since June 2009 as she believes she would not be able to continue her human rights work.

In February 2010, she told Amnesty International that the seven's file was empty and the accusations baseless.

On 24 March, the UN Human Rights Council voted to create a Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran.