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Iran: Amnesty International concerned by arrest of journalists and former prisoner of conscience

The arrest of six journalists and a prominent critic of the government in the Islamic Republic of Iran is yet another alarming sign of the increasing attacks on press freedom in recent weeks, Amnesty International said today.

The human rights organization is alarmed by recent reports that four employees of the Iranian daily newspaper *Tous* were arrested between the 16 and 20 September 1998. Mashallah Shamsolva'ezin, Hamid Reza Jalaipour, Mohammad Javadi Hesar and Ibrahim Nabavi were reportedly detained following the publication of an article questioning the policies of the Iranian government in Afghanistan and condemning the recent military build-up on Iran's eastern borders.

Even more alarming are reports that some of those arrested may be charged with the offence of *moharebe ba khoda* ('enmity with God') which normally carries the death penalty.

On 22 September 1998 Amnesty International received reports that two officials at the official Iranian news agency IRNA had been arrested and detained in Evin prison after a five hour interrogation. Mohammad Reza Sadeq, the deputy director of IRNA, and 'Ali Reza Khosravi, the editor-in-chief of the organisation's social department, were reportedly arrested following complaints made by Mohsen Rafiqdoost, the director of *Bonyad-e Mostazefan va Janbazan* (Foundation for the Disinherited and War Disabled).

Mohammad Reza Sadeq and 'Ali Reza Khosravi were reportedly released on 23 September 1998, after Mohsen Rafiqdoost dropped the charges against them and following protests by staff at IRNA.

Amnesty International is also concerned by the rearrest of 'Abbas Amir Entezam on 8 September 1998. A former government minister, he was arrested in 1979 on espionage charges and suffered torture and ill-treatment whilst imprisoned. He was transferred from prison to secure accommodation in 1995 due to ill health and was finally released from house arrest in 1997.

'Abbas Amir Entezam was reportedly rearrested following a radio interview in which he criticised the record of Assadollah Lajevardi, the retired former Director of Evin prison, assassinated by the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran (PMOI) on 23 August 1998. 'Abbas Amir Entezam is reportedly being held in Evin prison, although the exact nature of the charges brought against him, if any, remains unclear.

"We believe that all of those currently detained may be prisoners of conscience, who have not used or advocated violence and are held purely for political reasons. If this is the case they should be released immediately and unconditional," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International calls upon the Iranian authorities to provide full details of the charges against those arrested, and to allow any court proceedings to be scrutinized by independent bodies.

The authorities should also ensure that any trials meet the minimum standards for fair trial laid down in Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a state party.

Amnesty International also reminds the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran of its commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, particular Article 19, which states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression."

Background

The daily newspaper *Tous* began publication earlier this year, following the banning of the journal *Jameah* and maintained the editorial team of its predecessor. *Tous* was banned and its offices raided by members of the Revolutionary Guard on 16 September 1998, following calls by members of the Iranian leadership for tighter controls over the press. The ban was reportedly imposed by an Islamic revolutionary court for "*activities against national security and interests and opposition to the sacred government system of the Islamic Republic*".

Attacks on the freedom of the press have gathered momentum in recent weeks, following a relaxation of press restrictions in the aftermath of President Mohammad Khatami's election in May 1997. Ayatollah 'Ali Khamenei, Leader of the Islamic Republic, was reported recently to have called for action against publications which he said were "*abusing freedom of speech to weaken the people's Islamic beliefs*".

In addition to *Tous*, a number of other publications, including *Iran-e Farda*, *Rah-e Now* and *Taban*, have reportedly been banned recently.

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