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Iran urged to drop prison sentences against human rights activists

Amnesty International has denounced the prison sentences imposed on two leading Iranian human rights defenders and urged the authorities to drop all charges against them.

Human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh has been jailed for 11 years on charges of "acts against national security", "anti-regime propaganda" and belonging to the Centre for Human Rights Defenders.

The charges relate to her human rights work after the country's disputed 2009 presidential elections. It appears that Sotoudeh may not yet have been told the verdict and sentence imposed on her.

Journalist Shiva Nazar Ahari had her four-year prison sentence imposed for "acts against national security" and other charges, confirmed by an appeal court on Sunday. She may also face flogging; it remains unclear whether this part of her original sentence, subsequently converted to a cash fine, has been reinstated.

"The sentences imposed on Nasrin Sotoudeh and Shiva Nazar Ahari are outrageous and make a mockery of justice," said Malcolm Smart, Amnesty International's director for the Middle East and North Africa.

"Both women have been sentenced on account of their courageous defence of human rights and the very standards and values which the Iranian government is bound by international treaties to uphold," said Malcolm Smart. "It is truly a sorry state of affairs when such actions can be branded a threat to national security or the peddling of propaganda."

"Nasrin Sotoudeh is a prisoner of conscience and must be released immediately and unconditionally. Shiva Nazar Ahari should not be made to serve her sentence - it should be immediately withdrawn."

Nasrin Sotoudeh was mostly held in solitary confinement at Tehran's notorious Evin Prison from her arrest last September until the end of her trial two months later. She too is reported to have been banned from working as a lawyer for 20 years and barred from leaving Iran for 20 years.

Her lawyers are planning to appeal the verdict issued by Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran and say she has never belonged to the Centre for Human Rights Defenders.

The Centre was co-founded by Nobel Peace Laureate Shirin Ebadi, for whom Nasrin Sotoudeh has acted as defence lawyer. It was closed down by the Iranian authorities in December 2008.

Shiva Nazar Ahari, who was arrested in June 2009, was released on bail in September 2010. Her lawyers are said not to be planning to seek a judicial review of the case.

Amnesty International has campaigned on behalf of both women since their arrest. In November 2010 the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called for Nasrin Sotoudeh's case to be reviewed and for the Iranian authorities to expedite her release.

Shiva Nazar Ahari is a member of the Committee of Human Rights Reporters, a now banned organization. Other members of the human rights group have fled Iran, fearing for their safety, while other members continue to be held in Iran.

These sentences are part of an ongoing clampdown on human rights lawyers and activists in Iran, and include a range of other cases. On 30 October 2010, lawyer Mohammad Seifzadeh was sentenced to nine years in prison and a 10 year ban from practicing law.

Trials in such cases are uniformly unfair with defendants being denied access to lawyers of their choice and convicted on the basis of vague and broadly-drawn charges by courts and judges that are not independent.