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Leading Iran rights activist sentenced to 11 years

The 11-year sentence handed down to leading human rights activist Narges Mohammadi is another blatant attempt by the Iranian government to crush human rights organizations, Amnesty International said today.

Narges Mohammadi, the Executive chairperson of Iran's Centre for Human Rights Defenders (CHRD), was sentenced yesterday after her conviction for "propaganda against the system", and membership of a group "whose object is to disturb the security of the country."

The verdict issued by Revolutionary Court said Narges Mohammadi's peaceful activities were 'lies', and that her true aims were to tarnish the country's reputation.

The CHRD was co-founded by prominent Iranian lawyers and activists, and is headed by Nobel Peace Laureate Shirin Ebadi.

Shirin Ebadi told Amnesty International that "regrettably, Iran's Judiciary has lost its independence and has become a puppet of intelligence service interrogators."

"All of Narges Mohammadi's activities related to human rights and it was this that angered security officials. Narges continued her activism with deep conviction but the court ignored her defence and sentenced her to 11 years' imprisonment. It is an unjust sentence and is inconsistent not only with human rights provisions but also with Iran's own laws," said Shirin Ebadi.

Amnesty International is calling for the sentence to be overturned. If imprisoned to serve this sentence, Narges Mohammadi would be a prisoner of conscience.

"It is inexplicable how Narges Mohammadi, a long-standing and dedicated human rights activist, should be subjected to such an absurd verdict for her totally legitimate work," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa programme.

"It is not Narges Mohammadi who is tarnishing Iran's image but rather the actions of its security forces and the failures of the justice system."

Narges Mohammadi has campaigned in support of transparent elections and for an end to the execution of those under 18 years of age.

She also co-founded the National Peace Council which aims to relax international tensions over Iran's nuclear policy.

Her work over many years has led to human rights awards in several countries, but she was banned from travelling in 2009 when her passport was confiscated.

Mohammadi spoke to Amnesty International about her ongoing health issues due to her time behind bars, and said many other Iranians had come out of jail with serious medical problems. Her travel ban means she has been unable to travel to seek recommended medical care.

“We are seeing blanket criminalization of human rights work in Iran. Now nearly every defence lawyer and activist – both those in her organization and others - is being targeted for arrest and prosecution on specious ‘national security’ charges,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

Other founders of the CHRD, Abdolfattah Soltani, arrested on 12 September 2011, and Mohammad Seyfzadeh, serving a two-year prison sentence for his role in founding the CHRD, are also currently being held.

Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, another co-founder has been sentenced to a nine year prison term and a fine, but is free pending his appeal.

Shirin Ebadi told Amnesty International that security officials had earlier threatened Narges with a sentence as heavy as prominent defence lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh’s, if she continued her activism.

Sotoudeh, who has defended human rights activists, is serving a six-year prison term for her activities as a defence lawyer, reduced on appeal from 11 years. Her husband Reza Khandan has faced repeated questioning over his advocacy for his wife, and was questioned today at a court inside Evin Prison.

“While Iran tells the international community that it cooperates with domestic and international human rights groups, it forcibly closed the CHRD in December 2008 and continues to target members of other human rights organizations,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

Other groups under pressure from the Iranian authorities include the Committee for the Defence of Political Prisoners in Iran, Human Rights Activists in Iran and the Committee of Human Rights Reporters, as well as those advocating for greater minority rights.