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Iran must allow detained filmmaker to appear at Cannes

Amnesty International has urged Iran to release a filmmaker accused of criticizing the authorities and allow him to attend this week's Cannes Film Festival, where he has been invited as a member of the festival jury.

Ja'far Panahi is due to appear at the cinema showpiece in France on Wednesday but is detained in Tehran's Evin Prison, following his arrest on 1 March for making a film about the disputed presidential election of 2009.

Another Iranian filmmaker, Mohammad Ali Shirzadi, is detained in the same prison, apparently for filming an interview between a human rights defender and prominent dissenting cleric, Ayatollah Montazeri. Amnesty International considers both men to be prisoners of conscience.

"An empty chair at the Cannes Film Festival, set aside for Ja'far Panahi, will highlight the folly and injustice of Iran's crackdown on those who have peacefully criticized the government in the wake of last June's election," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa deputy director.

"Ja'far Panahi's work has garnered respect and plaudits internationally, yet in Iran he languishes in jail."

Panahi, 49, was arrested along with his wife, daughter and several other guests at his home when plainclothes police broke into his house on 1 March. The others have since been released and his wife was allowed to see him for the first time on 30 March.

Earlier this month, Hollywood stars including Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese and Robert De Niro called on the Iranian government to release the director, who has made internationally-acclaimed films such as *The White Balloon* and *The Circle*.

Amnesty International members worldwide have also joined the campaign for his release.

Ja'far Panahi was briefly arrested in July 2009 for taking part in a gathering marking the death of Neda Agha Soltan, a young woman reportedly killed by a member of the Basij militia during post-election protests in Tehran.

He was later released but was banned from travelling abroad, including to the 2010 Berlin Film Festival, in which he was due to participate.

Mohammad Ali Shirzadi was arrested by five unidentified men on 4 January 2010 outside his home in Tehran and had his computer, personal notebook and other items confiscated.

His family believe his arrest may be linked to an interview he filmed around two years ago between human rights defender Emadeddin Baghi and the late Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri.

Amnesty International has reminded the Iranian authorities that freedom of expression is

guaranteed under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a state party and that it includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media.

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