

Human rights center in city tracks abuses by Iranian forces

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NEW HAVEN — In his last job, Chris Lasala, a computer expert, ran an e-commerce Web site selling movies.

Today, he puts in long hours at a small suite of offices on Church Street documenting the bloody crackdown by Iranian security forces that continues to unfold after more than a million people hit the streets to protest what is largely perceived as a stolen presidential election.

“I’m bummed out all the time because I have to watch all these graphic videos. They are really terrible. But I think it is important that we are saving them all, because you don’t know how long they are going to be online,” Lasala said of the disturbing images of protesters being beaten and killed.

Among them is the murder of Neda Agha Soltan, 26, who has been transformed into an icon of the protest movement in Iran. Soltan was shot by a Basij gunman as she and her singing teacher got out of their car on the periphery of a demonstration.

Lasala, 33, is one of 10 young employees and interns at the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center who are collecting videos, photos and news reports as they wait to arrange interviews with eyewitnesses to the violence.

Their work has been crucial to telling the world what is happening in Iran. Since most foreign journalists are banned from Iran, the only way many images and stories are getting out is Iranian protesters filming events with cell phones.

Founded by a small group of human rights scholars, activists and historians in 2004, the center has issued several documented reports on conditions in Iran, including one on its secret prison system and more recently a paper on the jailing and torture of journalists and bloggers.

At the same time that they are monitoring events, they are up against an August deadline on a new report detailing the execution of 3,000 to 4,000 Iranian prisoners in 1988.

Staffed mainly by lawyers, several of whom are Farsi speakers, the center’s goal is to establish an objective, scholarly record of the human rights situation in Iran since the

Islamic Revolution in 1979.

Dealing in real time as events unfold is new to them, but they see it as too important to ignore.

“We’re in the process of gradually making contact with people who have been able to escape Iran so we can interview them. We need to document this. People need to be held accountable,” said Renee C. Redman, executive director of the center.

Lasala is working double shifts to keep up with the work. “You don’t mind working extra. Whatever is needed to get the job done,” he said.

The center has set up an encrypted Web page so people can contact them without being traced. It can be reached at www.iranhrdc.org. To boost such efforts, Redman is looking for \$75,000 in emergency grants to hire another lawyer and researcher to stay on top of events.

A JAILED JOURNALIST

Before the disputed Iranian election between President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and reform candidate Mir Hussein Moussavi dominated the news, a big story out of Iran was the arrest and conviction of American journalist Roxana Saberi.

She spent four months in Iran’s infamous Evin prison this year and was only released in May because of a well-publicized hunger strike and international pressure on Iran over the high-profile case.

Saberi, who was researching a book, said she confessed to being a U.S. spy because of the “severe psychological and mental pressure” the authorities put on her. The North Dakota woman said when her conscience got to her and she recanted the false confession, she was sentenced to eight years in prison, where she spent time with other women jailed for standing up for freedom of expression or belief. They were prisoners without a public voice.

The center’s report, “Ctrl+Alt+Delete: Iran’s Response to the Rise of the Internet,” documents many of the generally unknown journalists and bloggers tortured and imprisoned, starting during the administration of President Mahammad Khatami from 1997 to 2005 and now under Ahmadinejad.

Ironically, Khatami, a reformer, advocated for more freedom of expression, but he lacked the ability to protect the journalists who spoke out, including those who migrated to the Internet, said staffer Siavash Rahbari. The human rights abuses were twinned with an increase in laws restricting access to information.

Redman was alarmed over reports Friday that special courts were being set up to try the hundreds of demonstrators arrested in the recent protests and that the “infamous Saeed

Mortazavi” was leading the interrogations.

The center has documented Mortazavi’s role in the death of photojournalist Zahra Kazemi, and his connection with the torture and interrogation of journalists, including bloggers and other cyber-journalists. They found he was a key person in the conservative backlash against Khatami’s policies, which included the use of secret prisons and a parallel intelligence agency.

The Internet report is difficult to read, as it details in cool, unemotional language the torture that journalists underwent, based on the first-person interviews by the center’s staff.

“The interviews are the hardest part of the job ... You have to develop a thicker skin,” Rahbari said. Many are conducted in the U.S., but also in Europe and Canada where those targeted have relocated.

STORIES OF TORTURE

Arash Sigarchi, editor of Gilan-i Emrooz, in his interview, reported having the nails on his big toes pulled out, being fastened to a rod and suspended upside down in a torture known as “grilled chicken,” being attached to a pole with an engine that turned him into a “human fan,” being left in the freezing cold for hours. This was in addition to beatings and long stints of solitary confinement, before he was sentenced.

Rahbari, a human rights lawyer at the center, who did an internship with the International Tribunal for Rwanda, said the protesters being rounded up and arrested in Iran are likely to face some harsh treatment, if the center’s past investigations are any guide.

Higher-profile individuals are usually not tortured, Rahbari said. “But, if your profile isn’t that high and you are still considered a troublemaker, some terrible things might happen to you.”

“Iran has a modern, first-class police state. It is very efficient, and in the last couple of days they are using it more. It’s a scary police state that they have over there and nobody should underestimate it,” Rahbari warned.

A native of Iran, Rahbari, 29, left with his mother and brother for Germany when he was 7 years old. Later they were joined by his father, who had been imprisoned in Iran in the 1980s, and eventually the family emigrated to Texas.

Rahbari said every Iranian has a different opinion of what the massive protests in Iran over the election will eventually lead to.

“I have family members who are ready to go. They think this is it. This is going to be the toppling of the government. They’ve got their bags packed. ... To me, this is maybe a step — another step — toward reform. I might be wrong,” Rahbari said.

He is encouraged, however, by the size of the uprising and internal dissent among the clerics. If the erosion of support continues, it could be effective.

A number of scholars sit on the board of directors of the center, including Martha Minow, the new dean of the Harvard Law School; writer Roya Hakakian; Jonathan Freiman, Owen Fiss and John Simon of the Yale Law School; Payam Akhavan, a law professor at McGill University; and Dr. Ramin Ahmadi, a medical professor at Yale.

PRIMARY FACT-FINDING

Freiman said he generally has an interest in human rights, but when you consider Iran's geopolitical importance, he thought it was important to support the center's work.

"We like to think that we approach it as a prosecutorial model. We are not saying things on the basis of other news reports. There is some primary fact-finding. We try to bring a very detailed look," Freiman said. He said having Farsi speakers also gives the center an edge, as does the circulation of its findings within Iran.

Akhavan said the arrests of journalists, intellectuals and human rights activists in Iran is a reflection of the administration's fear of the emergence of a civil society.

The professor felt there was a direct connection "between accountability for human rights violations and the democratic transformation of Iran."

Redman said the center doesn't comment on U.S. political decisions on Iran, but human rights abuses shouldn't be ignored.

"Our position is that we do believe that the United States should be talking to Iran, but human rights have to be a topic of conversation. They just can't be shoved to the side," Redman said.

Asked if his work leaves him more, or less, hopeful about humanity, Rahbari was quick to answer.

"I think it is all getting better. We put people on trial now. We didn't used to do that. People would commit genocide and we would write them up as heroes. Now, you could be the head of a state and find yourself in front of a tribunal. I consider that progress," Rahbari said, taking the long view of history.

A discussion on Iran featuring Redman, Hakakian and Charles Small, executive director of the Yale Initiative for the Interdisciplinary Study of Anti-Semitism will be held Monday at the Jewish Community Center of Greater New Haven, 360 Amity Road, Woodbridge at 7 p.m.