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Iran: Rights Crisis Escalates Faces and Cases from Ahmadinejad's Crackdown

Under President Ahmadinejad's administration, Iran's human rights record has deteriorated markedly. While the international community's attention has focused on nuclear concerns, Iran has not been held accountable for its violations of international human rights law. Human Rights Watch and the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran believe that any international efforts to engage Iran toward reaching a resolution of the nuclear standoff should not come at the expense of attention to the human rights crisis in Iran.

Human Rights Watch and the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran call on the Iranian government to:

- Stop all executions of juvenile offenders and abolish the death penalty for juvenile offenders;
- Release all political prisoners and persons jailed solely for exercising peacefully their right to freedom of expression, association, and assembly;
- Honor Iran's standing invitations to the UN Special Rapporteurs and allow international human rights organizations to visit Iran to conduct research and advocacy.

Here are some of the current serious human rights abuses in Iran to bear in mind during President Ahmadinejad's visit to the UN.

I. Executions of Juvenile Offenders



Behnam Zare is one of the six juvenile offenders executed so far this year. Another 130 juveniles are currently on the death row. (© Iranian Human Rights Activists)

Iran leads the world in executing juvenile offenders -- persons under 18 at the time of their crime. Iran accounts for 26 of the 32 executions of juvenile offenders that have taken place in the world since January 2005. Iran's juvenile executions dwarf in number those of the only other countries known to have executed juvenile offenders: Saudi Arabia (2), Sudan (2), Pakistan (1), and Yemen (1).

In Iran, judges can impose the death penalty in capital cases if the defendant has attained "majority," defined in Iranian law as 9 years of age for girls and 15 years of age for boys. Iran is known to have executed six juvenile offenders so far in 2008, including two in August: Behnam Zare on August 26, 2008, and Seyyed Reza Hejazi on August 19, 2008. Over 130 other juvenile offenders have been sentenced to death and are awaiting execution.

Every member of the United Nations, including Iran, has ratified or acceded to treaties prohibiting sentencing juvenile offenders to death. As a party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Iran is obligated to abolish the death penalty for juvenile offenders. Iranian human rights defenders are campaigning vigorously to abolish this abhorrent practice. However, President Ahmadinejad's administration has so far done nothing to change laws and practices that have made Iran the leading executioner of juvenile offenders worldwide.

II. Executions—Iran's 300% Increase

Iran is also a world leader in overall executions. Iran executes more people than any other country except China. The number of executions in Iran has skyrocketed since the election of President Ahmadinejad. In 2005, the year he took office, Iran

executed 86 people. In 2007, Iran executed 317 people – an increase of nearly 300%. Many of these executions follow unfair trials in an extremely opaque judicial process. For example, 29 men were hanged on a single day - July 27, 2008 – though the authorities announced the names of only 10 of them. No other information about the other 19 executed men, including their names, charges against them, and details of their prosecution, has been released. Human Rights Watch and the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran oppose the death penalty in all circumstances due to its inherent cruel nature.

III. Arbitrary Detentions

The security and intelligence services routinely detain activists and dissidents for interrogation purposes. These arbitrary detentions, without charges filed, can last for months. In recent years, the Intelligence Ministry has particularly targeted Iranians who have active professional ties abroad, accusing them of being agents of Western efforts to instigate a “velvet revolution” in Iran. In the summer of 2007, three Iranian-Americans, Haleh Esfandiari, Ali Shakeri, and Kian Tajbakhsh, spent four months in detention under interrogation. Currently three Iranians with academic ties to US institutions are held and being interrogated.

Arash and Kamir Alaii

Two physicians, Arash and Kamir Alaii, internationally renowned for their pioneering work in AIDS prevention, have been in incommunicado detention since 22 June. On August 2, 2008, the deputy general prosecutor of Tehran, Hasan Hadad, said: “They have been involved in organizing gatherings on topics such as AIDS that have received attention from domestic and international NGOs. They acted to recruit individuals to travel abroad with the aim of training them on overthrowing the system....they were well-aware of their activities and topics of trainings such as velvet revolutions.”

Mehdi Zakerian

Mehdi Zakerian, a legal scholar who was scheduled to teach at the University of Pennsylvania this semester, was detained by security agents three weeks ago. The

authorities have not provided any information about his situation. Zakerian is also chairman of the Iranian International Relations Society and a senior researcher at the Center for Strategic Studies of the Middle East in Tehran.

IV. Political Prisoners

Iranian intelligence and security forces routinely detain peaceful activists, journalists, students, and human rights defenders and often charge them with “acting against national security.” The courts typically convict on these charges and sentence activists to lengthy prison terms. This trend has intensified under President Ahmadinejad and his intelligence apparatus. Prominent Iranian political prisoners include:

Mohammad Sadiq Kaboudvand

Muhammad Sadiq Kaboudvand is the founder of the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan (HROK) and a journalist. He has been in custody since June 2007, and is serving an 11- year prison term. Kaboudvand was kept in solitary confinement for 5 months in Evin Prison’s Sections 209 and 240. In April 2008, he suffered a stroke and was taken to a specialist to receive treatment.

Kaboudvand documented and reported on human rights violations in Iran’s Kurdish areas, from April 9, 2005, when he established HROK, until the time of his arrest. He was convicted of “acting against national security through founding of HROK,” “widespread propaganda against the state by disseminating news,” “opposing Islamic penal laws by publicizing punishments such as stoning and executions,” and “advocating on behalf of political prisoners.”

Farzad Kamangar

Farzad Kamangar, a 32-year-old Kurdish teacher and social worker in the city of Kamyaran, was prosecuted on charges of membership in the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). A Revolutionary Court sentenced Kamangar to death on February 25, 2008. Khalil Bahramian, his lawyer, said: “Nothing in Kamangar’s

judicial files and records demonstrates any links to the charges brought against him.”

Bahramian, the lawyer, who was present during the closed-door court hearing, described it as “lasting no more than five minutes, with the Judge issuing his sentence without any explanation and then promptly leaving the room.” He added, “I have seen absolutely zero evidence presented against Kamangar. In my forty years in the legal profession, I have never witnessed such a prosecution.”

The Supreme Court officially confirmed Kamangar's death sentence on July 11, 2008. He could be executed at any moment.

Mansour Osanloo

Mansour Osanloo, a leading trade-union activist, has been imprisoned several times during the past three years. Osanloo is currently held in Evin Prison, serving a 5- year prison sentence. He is a founding member of the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company, an independent union that has been campaigning vigorously for workers’ rights.

Agents of the Intelligence Ministry detained Osanloo in Evin Prison twice before: from September 7, 2005 to August 9, 2006 and from November 19 to December 19, 2007.

On February 24, 2007, Osanloo was summoned to a Revolutionary Court and charged with “attempts to jeopardize national security,” and “propaganda against the state.” In May 2007, the court sentenced Osanloo to five years in prison.

Emad Baghi

Emad Baghi, one of Iran’s foremost human rights defenders, is the founder of the Association for Defense of Prisoners’ Rights. He is currently serving a one-year sentence for articles he wrote a decade ago opposing the application of the death penalty. He was convicted of “publishing insulting material with unacceptable

interpretation of Islamic rules,” and “dissemination of falsehoods with intention of disturbing public opinion.”

Baghi suffers from severe heart and kidney ailments. On August 7, 2008, a prison doctor recommended strongly that he be taken to a hospital to receive treatment for his illnesses. On the same day, the authorities transferred Baghi to solitary confinement in Section 209 of Evin Prison, where intelligence agents interrogated him for three weeks.

As Baghi’s health deteriorated considerably, on September 16, 2008, the authorities released him for medical treatment. It is not clear if he will be returned to prison again.

Ayatollah Boroujerdi

Ayatollah Seyd Hussein Kazemini Boroujerdi advocates separation of religion and politics. He has been sentenced and jailed for his beliefs, and his life is in danger in prison on account of serious health problems.

Security forces raided Ayatollah Boroujerdi’s house in Tehran on October 8, 2006. In June 2007, the Special Court for the Clergy prosecuted him behind closed doors. The authorities have not provided any official account regarding his prosecution and sentencing. According to his associates, he was initially sentenced to death, but an appeals court reduced his sentence to 11 years in prison, 10 of which he must serve in exile, in the city of Yazd.

He has been deprived of access to an independent attorney throughout his prosecution and imprisonment.

Ayatollah Boroujerdi is suffering from multiple health complications, including heart and respiratory problems and kidney stone complications, as well as loss of 80 percent of his vision due to cataracts. According to his physician, Dr. Hesam Firoozi, Ayatollah Boroujerdi has lost as much as 80 pounds during his imprisonment.

“As an independent physician, with no political leanings and agenda, and in keeping with my sacred duties as a physician devoted to the goal of saving the lives of humans, I urge your Excellency to order his transfer to a specialist medical facility outside the prison, to save his life,” Dr. Firoozi wrote to the head of the Judiciary on September 2, 2008.

Hadi Ghabel

Hadi Ghabel, an outspoken Iranian cleric and member of the central council of the reformist Participation Front, was imprisoned on April 7, 2008 to begin a 40- month jail term following prosecution and conviction by the Special Court for the Clergy. The Special Court, charged with investigating other clerics for alleged crimes, has routinely prosecuted clerics who challenge official interpretations of religion. The court’s persecution and prosecution of religious scholars, based solely on their beliefs and opinions constitutes a form of modern inquisition aimed at rooting out clerics whose beliefs are considered politically threatening. Ghabel was sentenced to one year in prison for “acting against national security,” 10 months for “propaganda against state,” 15 months for “disturbing public opinion,” 100 days for “aspersion of the clergy,” and a financial fine of 5 million Rials (\$550) for “insulting the authorities.” He was also defrocked.

V. Persecution of Women’s Rights Activists

Iranian authorities have systematically thwarted peaceful and legal civil society efforts to advocate for women’s rights. Women’s rights advocates have been beaten, harassed and persecuted for peacefully demonstrating; for collecting signatures on behalf of the “Million Signatures Campaign” to end discrimination against women in Iran’s laws and legal system; for writing and publishing articles; and for convening meetings in their private homes. The Judiciary has prosecuted more than a hundred women’s rights activists over the past three years. Some of the recent cases are:

Ronak Safazadeh

Ronak Safazadeh , arrested on October 9, 2007, is a women’s rights activist in Sanadaj, capital of the province of Kurdistan. She is a member of the local women’s

organization, Azarmehr (Association of Kurdish Women). Ronak campaigned for women's rights by disseminating information and collecting signatures on behalf of the "One Million Signatures Campaign." The Intelligence Ministry charged her with the serious crime of "*moharebeh*," meaning armed activity against the state, which is punishable by death. The charges against her are solely based on interrogations during her solitary confinement.

Hana Abdi

Hana Abdi, a student and women's rights activist from the largely Kurdish city of Sanandaj, has been in prison since November 4, 2007. Branch 2 of the Sanandaj Revolutionary Court charged her with "collusion to threaten national security" and on June 18, 2008 ordered her to serve a five-year prison term in exile in the province of East Azerbaijan.

She was a volunteer in the One Million Signatures Campaign at the time of her arrest. According to her lawyer, Mohammad Sharif, Abdi's conviction was based solely on interrogations by Intelligence Ministry officials during two months of solitary confinement. The authorities denied Sharif access to his client during the interrogation process and the judge refused to consider the defense motions, referring only to interrogation reports.

Zaynab Bayazidi

Zaynab Bayazidi, a 26-year old women's rights activist, is serving a four year prison term. She is charged with being a member of the Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan, and for her work on behalf of the One Million Signature Campaign. The authorities detained Bayazidi on July 9, 2008, after she reported for a summons. The Revolutionary Court sentenced her to four years in prison on August 21, 2008.

Parvin Ardalan, Nahid Keshavarz, Jelveh Javaheri and Maryam Hosseinkhah

Parvin Ardalan, a leading women's rights activist, is the 2008 winner of the Olaf Palme prize. Ardalan, Nahid Keshavarz, Jelveh Javaheri, and Maryam Hosseinkhah are members of the One Million Signature Campaign. On September 2, 2008,

Tehran's Revolutionary Court sentenced them to six months imprisonment for articles they published in the on-line magazines *Zanestan* and *Tanir Barabari*. They are currently free on bail, awaiting the decision by the Appeal Court on their cases.

VI. Conclusion

During President Ahmadinejad's administration, Iran's human rights record has reached new lows. The security and intelligence services, controlled by his administration, have led an ever-expanding crackdown against peaceful activists and dissidents. Hard-line elements within the judiciary, emboldened by Ahmadinejad's lack of concern for human rights violations, have sent the number of executions skyrocketing, including those of juvenile offenders. In addition to prosecution and imprisonment of peaceful activists, Ahmadinejad's presidency has also created an intense atmosphere of fear and intimidation across most sectors of the country's once-vibrant and growing civil society.

The human cost of Ahmadinejad's policies is registering a heavy toll on Iran's civil society. It is imperative for the international community to take up the opportunity of President Ahmadinejad's presence at the United Nations to voice its concerns about the increasingly grave human rights violations in Iran.