

IRAN: Students enrol for degree in human rights

ISLAMABAD, 2 Apr 2003 (IRIN) - Ebrahim Anvari, aged 22, hopes one day to be working for the Iranian government, and believes that his degree in human rights, the first of its kind in the country, will help him achieve his ambition of doing so.

"Our country is still evolving, and we need to be more familiar with human rights and violations that are taking place, because people, especially women and children, aren't aware of their rights," he said.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has assisted the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of Tehran to establish MA and PhD degree courses in human rights, and also to establish the Centre for Human Rights Studies. The facility, which will also function as a national think-tank on human rights issues, was inaugurated in January 2001.

In its first academic year (2002-03), 12 students enrolled for the MA degree course. "The education in human rights and essential freedoms is a useful tool, and I have taken on this degree course because I want to improve my understanding so that I can help others," Anvari said.

"This project was the first of its kind for UNDP to establish capacity building for human-rights research and training in Iran," the UNDP programme officer in Tehran, Ahmad Salari, told IRIN. "This has established an institutional framework for human rights work."

He noted that the UNDP-supported project at the university was a starting point for the agency to initiate more work on the issue of human rights at the national level, and will begin by focusing on women's and children's rights. The work is progressing well, according to Salari.

"With help from UNDP, we are building up knowledge about international human rights mechanisms, and this can only have a positive impact on the promotion and protection of human rights in Iran," said Nasrin Mosaffa, the national director of the project and a member of the faculty.

Tehran has made some commitments to improving human rights by signing the following UN human rights conventions: The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

However, the signing of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in this deeply Islamic nation is still under discussion. "There are people who are in favour of signing the Convention within the government," Salari said.

He also observed that the issue of the Islamic shari'ah should be taken into consideration in the context of human rights in Iran. "If there are some articles or provisions in the [signed] conventions that are in contradiction with shari'ah, then priority is given to the shari'ah law."

There have also been calls from the Iranian Bar Association for Iran to sign the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel or Inhumane or Degrading Punishments. "Iran's membership of the convention will produce positive results for the country both at the national and international levels," a veteran lawyer, Bahman Keshavaraz, was quoted as saying by Iran's official news agency, IRNA.

Anvari remarked that the media played an important role in human-rights advocacy, saying that "a lot of work can be done through television and radio debates". He said students on the course

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had expressed an interest in starting a weekly paper in which they could publish articles they had written on human rights. "This is a great opportunity for the younger generation, and we hope that many more students will join the course in years to come," he added.

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