

Jailed Newsweek reporter faces personal ordeal

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BEIRUT – Newsweek reporter Maziar Bahari, who has been imprisoned in Iran for more than three months, got troubling news: His wife is having a difficult pregnancy and will be delivering their first child without him.

Paola Gourley could hear the shock in her husband's voice when she told him she would be having the baby two weeks early during a rare phone call Sunday from Tehran's Evin Prison.

"'What's wrong with you?' he kept asking," Gourley told The Associated Press on Monday from her home in London. She has been placed on bed rest by her doctor and is scheduled to deliver by cesarean section on Oct. 26.

The call_ only their second since Bahari, 42, was arrested on June 21 — was short, just a few minutes. And even with the relief of talking to him, it was bittersweet.

The two were to have been together in London for the first glimpse at their child — by ultrasound — when Bahari was arrested. On Sunday, she told him the baby's sex, a detail she preferred to keep private.

The couple met in March 2007 in London, where Gourley, 40, who is British, practices law. Bahari was born in Iran and emigrated to Canada, where he attended university and obtained Canadian citizenship.

A journalist and documentary filmmaker, he has worked for Newsweek for 10 years and has always been fully accredited with the Iranian authorities, said Newsweek's foreign editor, Nisid Hajari.

The magazine has appealed for Bahari's release on humanitarian grounds.

"There's a very strong humanitarian reason for him to be released so he can be with his partner when she gives birth," Hajari said in a telephone interview Monday from New York. "If they (the Iranians) want to engage with the rest of the world and build trust, freeing people like Maziar is a good way to start."

Iran entered direct negotiations last week with the U.S. and other world powers over its nuclear program, a significant step in reducing tensions with the outside world — and some hope the thaw could lead to the release of Bahari and other detained foreigners.

Gourley had not wanted to burden Bahari with news of her pregnancy's complications.

So when he called the first time, on Sept. 13, "I said I'm fine, I'm strong, not to worry about me ... I just wanted him to feel as strong as possible."

She was emotional, but tried not to break down. "I knew I didn't have time to cry."

"It was wonderful to hear his voice, but at the same time it made me so heartbroken to know that he was just going to leave the call and then go and get locked up in solitary confinement again," she said, adding that he told her that he was permitted to leave his cell only twice a day for 30 minutes.

Before the arrest, "we bought furniture, decorated the baby's room together," Gourley recalled. "He was really excited. He bought cupboards for the baby's room; he wanted to get involved, he was looking forward to spending time with me during the pregnancy."

Last week, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon made a joint call for the freeing of Bahari and Kian Tajbakhsh, an Iranian-American academic also arrested in the crackdown, as well as three American hikers. Joshua Fattal, Shane Bauer and Sarah Shourd were detained in late July.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been noncommittal when asked about the cases in recent interviews.

About Bahari, he told Newsweek, "I would like all prisoners to be released, but I am not the judge. The judge has to decide on this."

About the hikers, Ahmadinejad told the AP late last month that he hopes "the judiciary expedites the process and gives it its full attention, and to basically take a look at the case with maximum leniency."

Officials at the presidency, contacted by AP on Monday, refused further comment.

Bahari is among more than 100 prisoners put on mass trial in August, accused of being part of an opposition plot to foment a "velvet revolution" to topple Iran's clerical leaders on orders from its foreign enemies.

Many defendants delivered courtroom confessions admitting to their roles, which the opposition says were coerced. In his turn at the stand, Bahari said Western media had attempted to guide events in Iran following the election and he sought mercy from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Bahari's family and colleagues said his comments likely came under duress. Like other defendants, he has had no access to a lawyer and no specific charges have been announced against him.

Images from the courtroom showed a thin-looking Bahari.

"He had lost so much weight," said Gourley. "He didn't look himself at all. You could see anguish in his eyes. You just can't take any confession from someone in that condition at face value."

"I hope they will realize that Maziar is not a threat to national security," she said. "He was simply doing his job. And they know that."

Bahari's 83-year-old mother watched as he was taken into custody from her home in Tehran at dawn on June 21.

"Family values are very strong for him and now I'm sure he's quite devastated not to be near me now, when I'm pregnant," Gourley said.

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