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Prominent lawyer banned from leaving Iran

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The Iranian authorities banned a prominent human rights activist from leaving the country on Friday, Amnesty International has learned. Abdolfattah Soltani was due to travel to collect a human rights award in Germany.

Amnesty International deplored the move by the Iranian authorities as a breach of the right to freedom of movement, as guaranteed in international law.

According to his family, Abdolfattah Soltani was stopped in Tehran as he was about to board a flight to Germany early on Friday.

He was approached by plain-clothed men who confiscated his passport and told him that his permission to leave Iran had been "revoked". The men instructed him to go to the Presidential office next week to follow up on the matter.

Abdolfattah Soltani was on his way to the city of Nuremberg where he was due to receive the Nuremberg International Human Rights Award on Sunday. This prestigious award "is not only intended to honour the achievements of its awardees, but furthermore to contribute to the protection of endangered human rights defenders and to encourage others to commit themselves to human rights.

"It is endowed with €15,000 and is presented every two years to individuals or groups who have, in an exemplary manner, committed themselves to human rights, sometimes at considerable personal risk."

"Human rights defenders in Iran are not only sometimes detained for their work, but are subject to frequent harassment and intimidation by the security authorities," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Middle East programme deputy director of the Middle East at Amnesty International. "Many have been prevented from travelling abroad to attend human rights training workshops and seminars and to collect awards."

In most cases, they are not informed why they are not permitted to travel or under what legal authority and they have no effective remedy against such bans.

Abdolfattah Soltani is a member of the Centre for Human Rights Defenders (CHRD), which Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Shirin Ebadi and several other leading human rights activists founded in 2002.

He was arrested on 16 June this year, in the aftermath of the disputed 12 June presidential election in Iran. He was released seven weeks later on bail.

He had previously been arrested in 2005, when he spent 219 days in detention, 43 in solitary confinement. In 2006, He was sentenced to five years' imprisonment for "disclosing confidential documents" and "propaganda against the system".

However, on 28 May 2007, he was acquitted of all charges brought against him since his arrest in 2005. Since then, he has been banned from travelling outside Iran. However, he had recently been granted a passport and told that he would be allowed to travel to Germany.

Abdolfattah Soltani wanted to stand for election to the Central Bar Association's Board in 2008, but his candidacy was rejected on grounds of "unsuitability".

Amnesty International has consistently called on the Iranian government to lift the travel bans on all human rights activists and allow them to travel abroad in pursuit of their human rights work.

"The government should recognize the valuable role played by human rights defenders," said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui. "They should promote and support their work in line with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders adopted by the UN 10 years ago, rather than use unlawful tactics to undermine their work."

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