



Silencing the WATCHDOG?

*Supporters of an Iran human-rights monitoring group
ask why Washington turned off the funding spigot*

By KAREN SINGER

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In a small office off the New Haven Green, staffers at the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC) are compiling a report chronicling Iranian government abuses during its brutal crackdown on demonstrators following the June 2009 re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The report could be one of their last projects, according to IHRDC executive director Renee C. Redman. In July, Redman learned the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) had turned down the center's request for a \$2.7 million, two-year grant. Unless it can obtain sufficient income from other sources, she says, the center, which has relied mainly on money from the U.S. Department of State, will shut down in May 2010.

The IHRDC's financial problems became news in an October 6 *Boston Globe* story, triggering speculation and criticism in the blogosphere and beyond that the center's failed USAID grant proposal indicated a shift in the Obama administration's policy towards Iran. A State Department spokesman, however, says there has been no policy change.

The Bush administration allocated millions of dollars for pro-democracy activities, and the IHRDC was an early beneficiary. An outgrowth of the Griffin Center for Health & Human Rights, the center was established in 2004 with a \$1 million grant from the State Department's Human Rights and Democracy Fund to document human-rights abuses in Iran since the 1979 revolution, when Islamic leader Ayatollah Khomeini deposed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

The concept for the IHRDC grew out of discussions between Payam Akhavan, a former United Nations war crimes prosecutor and former senior fellow at the Yale Law School, Ramin Ahmadi, founder of the Griffin Center for Health & Human Rights and an associate professor at the Yale School of Medicine, and Roya Hakakian, a former associate producer at CBS' *60 Minutes*, poet and author of *Journey from the Land of No*, a memoir about growing up Jewish in post-revolutionary Iran.

"We collectively decided that a center to document human-rights violations could be very important, and it could have legal implications for providing a means for transitional justice, which is very important in the transition to

democracy in countries that are suffering a dictatorship," Ahmadi says. "One of the things that disrupts the process is the old elites recycle themselves. One day they will work for the Ministry of Justice. Then they put on a tie and call themselves new democrats. People become disillusioned with the process because it fails to deliver. In Germany, they created a ministry of all intelligence files, to make sure these people could not get jobs after the [1989] unification. We thought that model was great. In fact, I took a trip to Germany to see how it worked.

"Roya [Hakakian] was thinking of this as a source for collective memory, to make sure these kinds of disasters won't happen again."

The co-founders decided the center should be in the Elm City, "despite a lot of resistance that we got from other friends and people who said, 'Why New Haven? This is something that should be in Washington or New York,'" recalls Hakakian. "Despite its modest size, New Haven has always been and continues to be a place with interesting people and big ambitions that has always transcended its expectations."

Akhavan, Ahmadi and Hakakian became members of the IHRDC's board of directors, which also includes Martha Minow, dean of the Harvard Law School, Lawrence Douglas, a professor of law, jurisprudence and social thought at Amherst College and Roya Boroumand, a historian and co-founder of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation for the Promotion of Human Rights and Democracy in Iran.

The board chairman is Owen Fiss, Sterling Professor of Law at Yale.

"Three things come out of the center," Fiss says. "One is investigations of human-rights abuses, which are systematic and very detailed documentation of abuses — naming names, dates and events. No one does impartial objective reports of the facts to this depth. Secondly, we build an archive of documents related to this regime, made publicly available to the world. Third, we train lawyers in human-rights investigation, and so far, 20 to 25 interns.

"What's interesting is you have a local organization that has this global reach," Fiss adds.

The IHRDC has issued a dozen reports in English and Persian, with such titles as "Crimes Against Humanity: The Islamic Republic Attacks on the Bahais," "No



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Right after the elections we started looking for money to look into violations taking place after the crackdown,' says center director Redmond. Now the principal source of money has dried up.



IHRDC co-founder Hakakian 'was thinking of this as a source for collective memory, to make sure these kinds of disasters won't happen again.'

Safe Haven: Iran's Global Assassination Campaign" and "Forced Confessions: Targeting Iran's Cyber-Journalists."

The reports can be downloaded at the IHRDC Web site, iranhrdc.org, which also contains a searchable document database and a growing collection of videos and pictures, gleaned from a variety of online sources, of human-rights violations following the most recent election.

"From the beginning we were trying to diversify, to try to get away from dependence on the [U.S.] government," Fiss says. "It was difficult to raise significant money from other organizations so we kept going back to them as a matter of necessity."

Redman, the latest of several executive directors to head the center, says she has intensified efforts to increase the list of non-government funding sources since coming on board last January. According to the IHRDC Web site, the center's other funding sources include the American Association of University Woman, the Chicago Community Foundation, the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights, United Nations Study Group and the Vlock Family Foundation.



News that the USAID had turned down the center's \$2.7 million grant request came as a shock, Redman recalls, especially at a time when news reports were filled with often graphically violent footage showing the Iranian government response to post-election demonstrations.

"We were told the reasons [for the denial] in writing," she says. "They questioned whether we had the flexibility to react to current events in a timely manner — which was mystifying because that is what we were doing."

On June 25, the IHRDC issued a statement condemning the Iranian regime for "brutally" quelling "any expression of dissent" after the elections, and encouraging anyone with evidence of abuse "in writings, photos, videos and interviews of witnesses" to contact the center, which has a "secure encrypted system" on its Web site.

"Right after the elections we started looking for money to look into violations taking place after the crackdown," Redman says, "and we started the project by the end of the July with some money from the Canadian government."

A June 28 *New Haven Register* story featured interviews with several of the center's seven staff members, who include three Persian-speaking attorneys. None, however, would speak with a reporter who recently visited the center's third-floor office, across from the New Haven Green, for this story.

"It's a distraction," Redman says, adding the *Boston Globe* story about the IHRDC has resulted in "people using our organization as a political football for their own purposes."

Farah Stockman, who wrote the *Globe* story, isn't surprised other mainstream press outlets haven't picked up on the story.

"Reporters in Washington tend to follow what the government is doing rather than what it is not doing," Stockman says. "Support for Iranian activists is a not a big part of his [Obama's] platform, which is not to say he's not doing it. He's just not that loud about it."

Moreover, Stockman adds, "Democracy is not a big theme in the Obama administration the way it was under the Bush administration, when it was a big cornerstone and really sexy."

Edgar Vasquez, deputy spokesperson for

the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, refutes speculation that the USAID's motives for turning down the IHRDC grant request indicate a change in administration policy.

"U.S. government funding priorities for the region have not changed," he says, and "continue to include support for civil society and advocacy, promoting the rule of law and human rights and increasing access to alternative sources of information."

Though he won't comment on the IHRDC's USAID grant request, Vasquez adds, "All applications are reviewed against criteria outlined in the solicitation. It's a highly competitive process, with funding contingent on the technical merits of the proposal."

The denial worries IHRDC board member Akhavan.

"I think my main concern is that the U.S. and other governments not send a message to Iran that there's not a price attached to human-rights violations," he says. "It would be tragic if they're only concerned about the nuclear [weapons] issue, but that's how it could be construed."

Fiss calls the USAID's decision to reject the center's grant proposal, "a mistake — and a particularly egregious mistake because the need for investigation of human-rights abuses is enormous at this time in history."

Redman says the IHRDC didn't get another, smaller, State Department grant in 2008 but still has enough money from two other State Department grants and other funding sources to keep the center afloat through next May.

Hakakian believes the center has "great potential for growth."

"We certainly aren't short of ideas," she says. "Our ambitions have always been lot greater than our budget and our size. Contrary to the politicians in Washington, who never know what to do with Iran, we've always known what we wanted to do."

"In addition to producing reports, my pet dream project has always been to create a video archive, where we gather the video testimonies of victims, whose numbers are only growing," Hakakian says.

Fiss says the USAID grant would have enabled the center to develop "a video archive compatible to the Holocaust archive at Yale," as well as to hire more staff and conduct investigations into other

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human-rights abuses in Iran, including issues pertaining to women and the treatment of Sufis and Kurds.

Fiss and other board members are optimistic the center will survive.

“It leaves us with going to a lot of different foundations and to the Iranian people who liked our work but didn’t come forward to fund us,” Ahmadi says. “If they care about us, they need to roll up their sleeves and help us. We also have been blessed with a very young brilliant staff that works tirelessly, and also volunteers who do beautiful work without a penny.

“If nothing else, we have created a group of human-rights lawyers and researchers who are extremely good at what they do, and they are going to go on with their

work, regardless of what happens to the center,” Ahmadi adds. “We have a group of human-rights activists in Iran that send reports to us, and they are strong and it is not going to be rolled back.

“To get to know these young people, and to be a small part of their world is very exciting,” he adds. “They take their lives into their hands when they investigate and report. They take incredible risks.”

Since the *Boston Globe* story, Redman says, traffic on the IHRDC Web site has “surged,” and the center has received several thousand dollars in private donations, as well as heightened interest from institutional donors. Whether that interest translates into dollars remains to be seen.

“I’m more than happy if we can find non-government funding,” says center co-founder Akhavan, now a professor of

international law at McGill University in Montréal. “In a sense, now it removes one of the excuses the Islamic regime has to try and portray us as some kind of foreign conspiracy and arm of the U.S. government. We are simply documenting human rights abuses with the view of bringing perpetrators to justice.”

Though their future is in limbo, IHRDC staffers are aiming to complete and disseminate their report on post-election Iranian government abuses by January 2010, just in time for the United Nations Universal Periodic Review, which examines human-rights issues in UN member states, discusses Iran at its meeting in February.

“Our spirits are good,” say Redman. “We have a mission, and we do our work. The fact is non-profits are always living hand to mouth.” ❖