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U.S. Presses Tehran to Free Two Detainees

State Department Request Doesn't Make Their Release a Condition of Further Talks on Iran Nuclear Program

By [FARNAZ FASSIHI](#)

The United States is asking that Iran immediately release two jailed foreign nationals even as it pursues talks over Tehran's nuclear program, according to people familiar with the negotiations.

Families, colleagues and friends of the detainees have collected petitions signed by prominent figures and written letters to public officials as part of their far-reaching efforts to win the release of American-Iranian scholar Kian Tajbakhsh and Canadian-Iranian Newsweek journalist Maziar Bahari, who have been held captive by Iran for roughly three months.

The State Department says it pressed Iran on its human-rights record when representatives of the two countries sat at the negotiating table to discuss Iran's nuclear program in Geneva last week. So far, Iran hasn't taken any action.

The U.S. didn't make the release of Mr. Tajbakhsh, 47 years old, and Mr. Bahari, 42, a condition for further negotiations on the nuclear matter. The U.S. used the opportunity of the face-to-face high-level meeting with Iran to appeal for their release on humanitarian grounds and as a measure of goodwill, the people familiar with the talks say.

Supporters of the two men hope the backdrop of the talks will aid their cause. "If Iran is trying to build trust with the rest of the world one good way to do it would be to release people like Maziar and Kian," said Newsweek's foreign editor Nisid Hajari.

The two men are the only foreign nationals arrested in relation to the recent unrest surrounding controversial presidential elections in June. Neither has a political affiliation in Iran.

Three young Americans have been detained since the end of July by Iran for illegally crossing the Iranian border during a hike in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq. Iran allowed a representative of the Swiss Embassy to meet with the hikers last week.

Mr. Tajbakhsh and Mr. Bahari were arrested soon after the elections, on different days but under similar circumstances. Intelligence officials raided their homes in the middle of the night, confiscated their computers, documents and passports. The two men were taken to the notorious Evin prison, to the ward controlled by the intelligence unit of the Revolutionary Guards. They have had no access to legal counsel, and haven't been charged or sentenced, according to their families.

Prisoners who have been released on bail recently from the same ward say they were blindfolded most of the day, beaten, psychologically tortured and interrogated for up to 12 hours at a time, often in the middle of the night.

Mr. Tajbakhsh and Mr. Bahari looked visibly thinner and haggard when they appeared in televised mass trials in August next to prominent opposition figures. Each delivered a confession detailing how, in their respective roles as academic and journalist, they had unwittingly participated in a plot by the West for a so-called soft revolution against Iran's regime.

The court appearance was the first time their families had seen them since the arrests. Families and colleagues dismiss the confessions and say they were coerced.

Mr. Tajbakhsh's two-year-old daughter, Hasti, ran to the television and kissed the screen as it showed him mumbling his confession, and his wife sobbed, according to family members. Mr. Tajbakhsh and his family were planning to move this fall from Tehran to New York, where he was scheduled to start teaching at Columbia University.

In London, Mr. Bahari's wife, Paola Gourley, is eight months pregnant with the couple's first child. She says her husband's hollow eyes in court shocked her.

"Understanding the reality of where he is and what he is going through was heartbreaking," says Ms. Gourley, a British lawyer. Since his court appearance, she says she has suffered serious pregnancy complications threatening her life and the baby's and has been hospitalized twice. She says doctors tell her the problems are related to too much stress.

Messrs. Bahari and Tajbakhsh have recently been allowed occasional brief phone calls and visits with their families supervised by a prison guard.

Mr. Tajbakhsh holds a Ph.D. in urban planning from Columbia University, and grew up in London and New York. In 2001, Mr. Tajbakhsh returned to Iran to research a project about Iran's government institutions. Mr. Tajbakhsh met and married his wife Bahar and settled in Tehran. He was arrested and imprisoned for four months in 2007.

Mr. Bahari, who studied in Canada, divides his time between London and Tehran. He has been Newsweek's Iran correspondent since 1998 and has made a series of award-winning documentary films. Mr. Bahari was a finalist for the prestigious Prince of Asturias Award for Concord in 2009, for his coverage of Iran.

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