

Joint open letter to the Iranian authorities

We, the undersigned international women's and human rights organizations, submit this letter to express our deep concern regarding the increasing harassment of women human rights defenders in Iran.

Over the past three years, the Iranian regime has engaged in a systematic campaign of repression against women's rights activists. Since their heavy handed break-up of a peaceful women's rights demonstration on June 12, 2006, the authorities in Iran have arrested, detained, interrogated, and prosecuted dozens of Iranian women human rights defenders active on numerous fronts to promote human rights and gender equality in Iran.

Among those targeted have been members of the One Million Signatures Campaign, a grass-roots movement launched over two years ago to promote gender equality in Iranian laws. The Campaign aims to raise awareness of Iranian laws that sanction discrimination against women by collecting one million signatures in support of their repeal.

Law enforcement bodies have responded by prosecuting at least 45 members of the Campaign. Campaign members have been sentenced for writing, for meeting in homes (which they are forced to do as public spaces are not made available to them), and for collecting signatures. The government continues to detain, intimidate, and prohibit the women's rights activists from travelling.

Recent developments include:

- The sentencing of Campaign member Zeinab Peyghambarzadeh;
- The October 15, 2008 arrest and continued detention of student and Campaign member Esha Momeni;
- The prevention of Campaign member Sussan Tahmasebi from traveling;

and

- The search of Campaign member Parastoo Alahyaari's home and the seizure of her laptop computer and other Campaign-related materials.

On November 2, 2008, an appeals court sentenced Zeinab Peyghambarzadeh to a one-year prison term. The sentence, suspended for a period of 3 years, will require Peyghambarzadeh to report to the Intelligence Ministry every 4 months during this time. This sentence is in connection with her arrest on March 4 2007 during a peaceful protest in support of women's rights activists on trial, during which 32 other women's rights activists were also arrested. Peyghambarzadeh is also the first Campaign member to have been arrested while collecting signatures.

On October 15, 2008, two individuals who identified themselves as traffic police pulled Esha Momeni over on the pretext of illegally passing another vehicle and arrested her. Momeni, a dual American-Iranian citizen, is a graduate student at California State University, Northridge who is conducting research for her Master's thesis on the Iranian women's movement. She is detained in Section 209 of Evin Prison. Security officials also searched Momeni's home and seized her computer and her films of interviews with members of the One Million Signatures Campaign as part of her thesis project.

On October 26, 2008, security officials at Imam Khomeini Airport confiscated Sussan Tahmasebi's

passport and prevented her from traveling. The same day, Tahmasebi's home was searched by five agents who seized Tahmasebi's laptop computer, books, and other materials. This is the fourth time Tahmasebi has been prevented from traveling; despite repeated inquiries, she has yet to be given a reason for the travel ban. Three days later, Tahmasebi was interrogated for five hours at the security offices of the Revolutionary Court.

On October 18, 2008, two officers from the Gisha Police Station searched the home of Parastoo Alahyaari while she was at work. The officers took her laptop, CDs, books, picture albums, and other Campaign materials, leaving a summons with Alahyaari's mother. Later, security officials escorted Alahyaari to the Revolutionary Court, where she was interrogated by an investigative judge assigned to her case. The previous day Alahyaari and other Campaign members met in Laleh Park in Tehran, but had to disperse when police officers ordered them to do so.

We strongly object to the continued harassment of these women's rights activists, who are being targeted for non-violent activity to promote women's rights.

We urge the Iranian government to respect the right of these activists to freedom of association and assembly. These rights are enshrined in and protected by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Iran is a state party of the ICCPR and therefore legally bound to implement it.

We note, in particular, that the actions of the Iranian authorities directly contravene several provisions of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 9, 1998, in particular: Article 1 (recognizing everyone's right, */individually and in association with others/*, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights); Article 5 (recognizing the right of defenders to meet and assemble peacefully, to join and form non-governmental organizations, associations or groups, and communicate with non-governmental or intergovernmental organizations); and Article 9 (granting defenders unhindered access to and communication with international bodies on matters of human rights).

On October 24, 2008, Iran publicly proclaimed its support for the protection of human rights defenders by actively participating in the interactive dialogue at the UN General Assembly with the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders. Yet on this tenth anniversary of the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the actions of the Iranian government violate the letter and spirit of the declaration.

Civil society organizations must be allowed to associate freely and to travel and participate in international conferences, if the Iranian government is to abide by its commitment to the international human rights instruments to which it is party.

Accordingly, we call upon the Iranian government to:

- overturn the conviction of Zeinab Peyghambarzadeh;
- release Esha Momeni and return her property;
- return Sussan Tahmasebi's passport and other confiscated possessions to her and lift the ban that has repeatedly prevented her from traveling; and
- return the property of Parastoo Alahyaari to her and refrain from bringing charges against her.

- End the harassment and prosecution of members of all women's rights activists and defenders in Iran, including members of the One Million Signatures Campaign.

Thank you for your attention to these urgent matters.

Matthew Easton
Director - Human Rights Defenders Program
Human Rights First

Sunila Abeysekera
Executive Director
International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific

Nehad Abul Komsan
Executive Director
Egyptian Center for Women's Rights

Souheyr Belhassen
President
International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)

Taina Bien-Aimé
Executive Director
Equality Now

Charlotte Bunch
Executive Director
Center for Global Women's Leadership

Cindy Clark
Acting Interim Director
Association for Women's Rights in Development

Farida Deif
Women's Rights Division
Human Rights Watch

Lynnsay Francis
Regional Coordinator
The Asia Pacific Forum on Women and Development (APWLD)

Hadi Ghaemi
Coordinator
International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran

Mary Lawlor
Director
Front Line The International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

Virada Somswasdi
President
Foundation for Women, Law and Rural Development (FORWARD)

Eric Sottas
Secretary General
World Organization Against Torture (OMCT)

Women Living Under Muslim Laws International Solidarity Network