



enue

December 31, 2008

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad
The Presidency
Palestine Avenue, Azerbaijan Intersection,
Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

Dear President Ahmadinejad:

On behalf of Human Rights First, an independent, international human rights organization founded in 1978 and based in New York, I wish to express our deep concern regarding the recent closure of the Center for Defense of Human Rights, headed by Shirin Ebadi, followed by the raid of her private office on December 29.

According to the spokesperson for the Center and various media reports, on December 21 dozens of plainclothes security agents and police officers came to the Center and ordered that the office be closed. The Center was preparing to host an event marking the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Tax officials then visited Ms. Ebadi's office a few days later. She cooperated and presented them with all relevant documentation. Nevertheless, the Mehr News Agency later reported that Ms. Ebadi had failed to pay taxes, a claim she denies.

On December 29, five security officers identifying themselves as tax officials raided Ms. Ebadi's private office. It is reported that they demanded to take Ms. Ebadi's personal computer and some documents from her office. While Ms. Ebadi initially refused to turn over her computer and other documents on the grounds that it would breach client confidentiality, she was eventually compelled to hand over the materials.

The Interior Ministry has made previous attempts to ban the Center. Ms. Ebadi has been summoned to court on multiple occasions and one of her colleagues at the Center, Abdolfattah Soltani, was arrested in July 2005 and detained for nearly eight months.

For the past several months Ms. Ebadi has also been subjected to a sustained attack in government-controlled papers. These attacks included rumors that were circulated through the Islamic Republic News Agency and Kayhan News that her daughter had converted to the Baha'i faith, a serious charge in Iran. In September 2008, after pressure from the Iranian Foreign Ministry, Malaysian authorities canceled a series of university lectures by Ms. Ebadi in that country. The Iranian Foreign Ministry had reportedly warned that permitting Ms. Ebadi to lecture in Malaysia would "damage the good relations" between the two countries.

We strongly object to the closure of Ms. Ebadi's center, which we fear heralds increasing pressure on human rights defenders as a whole. As we noted in a letter published in the Washington Post on December 26, Ms. Ebadi's story is just one example of a much broader problem. Activists promoting criminal justice reform, the rights of ethnic minorities, and workers' rights have been harassed, subjected to travel bans, monitored, interrogated, prosecuted, and imprisoned. The simple act of collecting signatures in support of gender equality has led to at least 45 arrests.

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The authorities have indicated that Ms. Ebadi's Center had to be shut down because it was operating without permission. They have charged that the Center has been carrying out illegal activities, such as publishing statements, writing letters to international organizations, and holding news conferences. The alleged “illegal” activities undertaken by Ms. Ebadi's Center, such as publishing reports and communicating with international organizations, are protected under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a signatory. Furthermore, the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders also provides that everyone has the right, “individually and in association with others” to “promote and strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms.” Articles 5 and 6 of the Declaration provide for the freedom to communicate, to receive, and disseminate information pertaining to human rights.

The latest actions of the authorities in Iran directly violate all these provisions. If the Iranian government wishes to defuse recent United Nations criticism of its human rights record, it should immediately reverse the closure order against the Center for the Defense of Human Rights, return any documents that have been confiscated, and allow all civil society activists to carry out their important work without fear.

Sincerely,

Matthew Easton
Director
Human Rights Defenders Program

Cc:
Supreme Leader Seyyed Ali Khamenei
Interest Section of the Islamic Republic of Iran
Iran Mission to the United Nations