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Free Press and Free Expression Organizations to Iran: Release Jailed Journalists, Writers

Committee to Protect Journalists, PEN, Reporters Sans Frontières, Index on Censorship, Canadian Journalists for Free Expression, International Publishers Association launch “intensive, global effort” to win release of more than 60 currently in Iranian prisons

February 11, 2010, New York, London, Paris, Geneva—A coalition of leading international journalists’, writers’, and publishers’ organizations today launched a campaign to press the government of Iran to release their colleagues imprisoned in the wake of last year’s disputed presidential election in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Committee to Protect Journalists, PEN, Reporters Sans Frontières, Index on Censorship, Canadian Journalists for Free Expression, and the International Publishers Association have joined forces for the campaign out of what the groups have called “a sense of shared, urgent concern for the welfare of journalists, writers, and bloggers and a profound alarm over the situation for free expression in Iran.”

The “Our Society Will Be a Free Society” campaign, named for a pledge the Ayatollah Khomeini made during the 1979 Iranian revolution to protect freedom of expression and the press, kicks off on the 31st anniversary of the revolution and four days before the UN Human Rights Council convenes in Geneva to review Iran’s human rights record. In an open letter released today, the coalition called on Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to honor the original spirit of the Iranian revolution and order the release of at least 60 writers, journalists, and bloggers currently in prison in Iran in apparent violation of their right to freedom of expression.

In an op-ed published yesterday in the *International Herald Tribune* and addressed to Ayatollah Khamenei, Iranian-Canadian journalist and documentary filmmaker Maziar Bahari cited the revolutionary leader’s pledge, and said “The only accusation against many reporters who are languishing in Iranian jails at the moment is that they held a mirror to the actions of the Iranian government. They did not want to overthrow it. They never took up arms. All of them did their job as peacefully as journalists elsewhere around the world.”

Bahari, who was arrested for his reporting on demonstrations in Tehran in the days after the disputed June 2009 election, spent nearly four months in Iran’s notorious Evin Prison before he was released on bail in October and allowed to rejoin his pregnant wife in London.

“Your government had issued me a press card,” Bahari recalled. “But I was coerced to make a false televised confession admitting that I was acting as an agent of evil Western media. I was forced to say the media are trying to overthrow the Islamic government. I was beaten and

threatened with execution to make that confession. I was beaten again after the show because I did not perform as well as my interrogator would have liked. Yes, Ayatollah Khamenei, I had to apologize to you on television to stop my torturer from punching me in the head.”

The list of writers, journalists, and bloggers currently in prison in Iran includes some of Iran’s most distinguished journalists, some of the country’s leading bloggers, and Kian Tajbakhsh, an Iranian-American scholar and social planner who was sentenced in August 2009 to 15 years in prison following a mass trial of 140 activists, intellectuals, and writers accused of fomenting a “velvet revolution.” Among the journalists are Emadeddin Baghi, also a well known author and human rights defender; Mashallah Shamsolvaezin, an award-winning editor and press freedom advocate; and Shiva Nazar Ahari, a human rights journalist who has been jailed twice in the last eight months. The Committee to Protect Journalists this month announced that the 47 journalists now in prison in Iran are more than any other country on earth has imprisoned at any one time since 1996.

“Despite mass arrests, forced confessions, harassment and intimidation, journalists are still working,” said Committee to Protect Journalists Chairman Paul Steiger. “We must send these courageous men and women, and the nearly 50 journalists currently behind bars, a clear message of support. Iran is now the biggest jailer of journalists in the world. President Ahmadinejad should be ashamed of this fact and release our colleagues immediately.”

The coalition is not only addressing the government of Iran, but also urging world leaders to apply pressure on Iran to release all those who are in prison simply for exercising their right to freedom of expression.

“Next week, the Human Rights Council of the United Nations meets to examine Iran’s human rights record,” said Marian Botsford Fraser, Chair of the Writers in Prison Committee of International PEN. “In its own submission to the Council, the government of Iran points out that its constitution protects basic human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, the freedom to assemble peacefully, and freedom from arbitrary arrests”

“And yet,” Fraser continued, “Despite these protections, the Human Rights council has before it more than 200 reports documenting the arbitrary arrests, incommunicado detentions, and torture, often for the purposes of extracting false confessions, of intellectuals, students, artists, human rights defenders, journalists, and others after the disputed presidential elections last year. We implore the members of the Council to question Iran carefully on its human rights performance, and especially on the fate of at least 60 writers, journalists, and bloggers currently in prison in that country.”

“Arresting journalists and writers is wrong and counterproductive at the same time,” Maziar Bahari said today. “It is illegal even according to Iranian laws, and the Iranian government is actually undermining its own authority by arresting journalists. In Iran, journalists have always reflected people’s frustration with the government. By denying people of a peaceful way to vent their anger the government of Iran is forcing people to act out their anger on the streets,” he concluded.

The “Our Society Will Be A Free Society” campaign is a joint initiative of The Committee to Protect Journalists, International PEN and PEN American Center and English PEN, Reporters Sans Frontières, Index on Censorship, Canadian Journalists for Free Expression, and the

International Publishers Association. The campaign will run through March 20, 2010, the Iranian New Year, with events aimed at building pressure for the release of writers and journalists in prison in Iran continuing in North America and Europe through the spring.

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