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Iran: Web Writers Purge Underway *Arrests Designed to Silence NGO Activists*

(New York, November 9, 2004) – The Iranian government is moving to silence Internet and Web-log communications, the last remaining outlet for freedom of expression in the country, Human Rights Watch said today.

Many of Iran’s most high-profile civil society activists rely on the internet to get their message out. Human Rights Watch said that the Iranian authorities are arresting these activists and bloggers in order to cripple the country’s growing network of independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

“The internet has been a gateway for outreach and information sharing with the Iranian public,” said Joe Stork, Washington director of Human Right Watch’s Middle East and North Africa Division. “With so many NGO activists arrested or under surveillance, the remaining members of civil society fear for their safety.”

Human Rights Watch said that the arrests, which began on September 7, point to a disturbing development in which the government is attacking mid-level activists in the NGO community for the first time. In case of the Internet-related arrests, the authorities are detaining contributing journalists and technicians rather than higher-profile political leaders under whose names these web sites operate.

“We’re talking about rank and file activists working on social and cultural issues,” said Stork. “Their basic freedoms are being sacrificed as conservative leaders try to purge critics from society.”

Human Rights Watch said that to date none of the detainees have been charged with any crime. Judicial authorities have given differing reasons for these arrests. On October 12, 2004, Jamal Karimi Rad, the judiciary’s spokesman, said that the detainees were accused of “propaganda against the regime, endangering national security, inciting public unrest, and insulting sacred belief.” The head of the judiciary, Ayatollah Shahrudi, in an interview with state-run television on October 27, 2004 stated that “these people will be tried in connection with moral crimes.”

Nemat Ahmadi, defense counsel for some of the detainees, has been repeatedly barred from meeting his clients and has stated that they are being kept in solitary confinement.

“The only criminal behavior here appears to be that of Iran’s judiciary officials,” Stork said. “They seem to be ready to defy the country’s own laws as well as its international human rights obligations in solidifying their hold on power.”

Human Rights Watch called on the Iranian authorities to end their harassment and intimidation of peaceful critics, and free the arrested activists immediately and unconditionally.

Background:

Internet writers and civil society activists who have been arrested over the past two months include:

- ? Mahbubeh Abasgholizadeh, the editor of Farzaneh, women’s rights and NGO activist, arrested at her home on November 2,
- ? Fereshteh Ghazi of the daily Etemad and on-line journalist, arrested in her office on October 28,
- ? Reza Mir Ebrahimi, former editor of foreign affairs of daily Etemad, arrested on October 27,
- ? Javad Gholam Tamayomi of the daily Mardomsalari, arrested on October 18,
- ? Omid Memarian, NGO activist and on-line journalist, arrested in his office on October 10,
- ? Hanif Mazroi, former journalist, arrested on September 8,
- ? Amir Mojiri, on-line journalist, arrested on September 8, and
- ? Shahram Rafihzadeh, cultural editor of daily Etemad, arrested on September 7, 2004.

In addition, a number of prominent civil society activists, including Azam Taleghani, Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, Imad-din Baghi, and Mohammad Maleki have been banned from leaving the country.