

Big Arrest of Dissidents in Iran

Roundup of More Than 20 Activists

(New York, March 13, 2001) Human Rights Watch today condemned the Sunday arrest of more than 20 political activists for taking part in a meeting at a private house in Tehran. The arrests were ordered by the Tehran Revolutionary Court-Branch 26 and as of this time the charges against and the whereabouts of the detainees remain unknown.

Those arrested come from a variety of non-violent opposition groups who collaborate in an informal religious-nationalist alliance. The alliance had been supportive of the reform policies of President Khatami and critical of efforts to block reform by conservative clerics. They had been holding weekly meetings since 1984, at which they debated current political events. Since the 1997 election of President Khatami, they had widened participation in this forum and attendance had increased accordingly.

The meeting was held in the home of Mohammad Basteh-Negar, son-in-law of Grand Ayatollah Taleghani, a renowned critic of the Shah, and an inspirational figure for supporters of a liberal view of Islamic government in Iran.

"This appears to be yet another example of conservative groups exploiting their control over the judiciary to harass independent political activists and prevent them from exercising their basic human rights," said Hanny Megally, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa Division. "Iranians should be able to meet freely in their own homes without this blatant intimidation."

The names of detainees so far available to Human Rights Watch include: Mohammad Mohammadi-Gorgani, Ali Mohammadi-Gorgani, Ahmad Zeid-Abadi, Nezameddin Ghahari, Mohammad Mohammadi Ardehali, Ali Reza Rajaei, Massoud Pedram, Nasser Hashemi-Rad, Dr. Reza Reiss-Toussi, Dr. Hossein Rafei, Dr. Mohammad Malekei, Dr. Habibollah Peiman, Marzieh Mortazi, Morteza Kazemian, Mohammad Basteh-Negar, Taghi Rahmani, Saeid Madani, Mahmoud Omarani, Fatemeh Govaraei and Bahman Rezakhani.

One of the detained, Ahmad Zeid-Abadi, is a prominent journalist who is facing charges for his writings in the independent press but was recently released on bail. Another, Ali Reza Rajaei, stood as a parliamentary candidate in last year's elections but his candidature was ruled inadmissible by the conservative Council of Guardians. Dr. Habibollah Peiman is the leader of the Militant Islamic Fighters party; Marzieh Mortazi is his wife. Fatemeh Govaraei and Taghi Rahmani are both journalists.

These detentions appeared to be timed as a response to President Khatami's speech before parliament on Sunday, where he defended his reformist program. The arrests also follow a pattern of measures taken by conservatives to embarrass the president prior to major foreign trips. President Khatami left for Moscow yesterday.

Human Rights Watch is calling for the immediate release of all the detainees, and for an end to the persecution of reformists and non-violent government critics.